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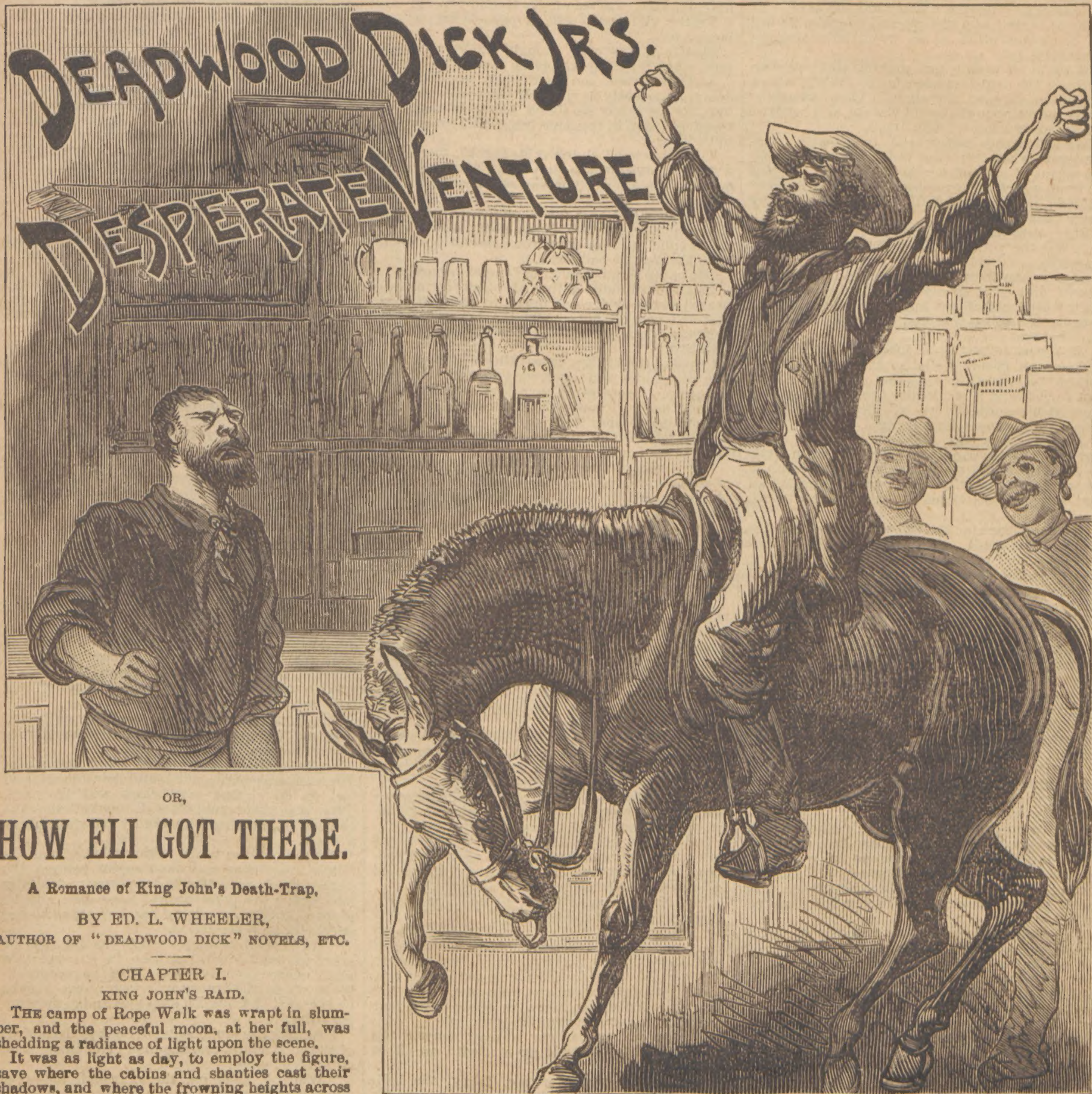
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Vol. XXXI.



OR, HOW ELI GOT THERE.

A Romance of King John's Death-Trap.

BY ED. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I. KING JOHN'S RAID.

THE camp of Rope Walk was wrapt in slumber, and the peaceful moon, at her full, was shedding a radiance of light upon the scene.

It was as light as day, to employ the figure, save where the cabins and shanties cast their shadows, and where the frowning heights across the chasm made the depths of the latter inky black.

THE YELL ELI LET OUT WAS ALMOST EARSPLITTING.

The chain bridge was in the shadow of these towering bluffs, for the moon was at that angle which carried the break of the defile over the bridge, making one single band of light across the dismal chasm and showing its rugged sides for a little depth.

Here in the shadow at the bridge stood the night watchman, guarding the only way that gave entrance to the camp.

Rope Walk was peculiarly situated. Upon a level plateau some acres in extent and nearly horseshoe in shape, it was inclosed for fully two-thirds of its circle by a steep rocky wall.

The remaining part fronted upon the chasm mentioned, which was spanned by a single bridge, the only means of ingress or egress the camp had, or could have. It would have been altogether a place uninhabitable but for an immense and never-failing spring near the rear center.

The bridge mentioned faced a defile which had scarcely a foothold of frontage, as compared with the opposite level, and which ran a devious course until it came out upon the distant levels and finally struck into a regular trail down among the foot-hills, where, twice a week, a stage passed, and where an occasional passenger for Rope Walk was dropped.

A strange name for a camp, do you say?

Rope Walk had a history, and had been named in commemoration of an event attending its discovery.

A party of prospectors making their way up through the defile, and coming to the end where the chasm yawned at their feet, gazed scrutinizingly across upon the broad plateau, and believed they had struck a "likely" spot.

And their eagerness was all the greater to investigate when there was found to be absolutely no means of getting across the chasm. It was to them a sort of "promised land," this isolated plateau, but one which, like Moses of old, they might not enter.

How were they to get over?

It was the youth of the party who solved the problem.

If any man there could throw a lasso, he declared, and fix it firmly around a shoulder of rock which he pointed out, he would walk the lasso to the other side and so render possible a rope bridge!

This was taken for a joke, at first, but the young man meant it, and as there did not appear to be any other way, that plan was at last put to vote and it was decided to take the young man at his word and try it. But, they had no lasso, and no ropes for a bridge.

All that, however, was minor to the main project. These could be procured, with little delay. So, while the others went into camp in the foot-hills one of the party took the back trail to the nearest settlement to procure the things needed.

He came back at the expected time, and the venture was made. A strong-armed expert cast the lasso, and after a few trials, the slip noose finally coiled around the shoulder of rock and settled there securely. The other end was then made fast and the light line drawn taut, when the young man, removing his boots, walked safely and quickly to the other side.

Continued cheering from his companions greeted the success of his daring performance when he was safe on the opposite ledge, for they had been almost holding their breath in their anxiety as they watched his quick-step progress. The work of constructing the temporary rope bridge was then begun, and when all had crossed they began their prospecting.

A rich strike was made, they settled down to stay, and after canvassing awhile for a name for their camp, finally decided to call it that which we have designated.

The camp grew and prospered; a heavy wire rope bridge was at length constructed, one capable of bearing teams and wagons safely across; then a young city began to spring up. And the prosperity continued without a drawback until came the interruption which our tale must relate.

One night the camp was surprised by a band of rascals who made a foray upon it, carrying off everything of value they could get away with, and who, when they were ready to depart, awakened the sleeping citizens with their wild yells, and when they had crossed the bridge, cut or cast loose the ropes and anchorages—a hot fire of revolvers being exchanged the while.

On that occasion several were killed and wounded on both sides, and as pursuit was impossible the robbers got away.

Another bridge was begun at once, this time of chain-cables instead of wire ropes, and after its completion the camp settled down in a sense

of security, for it was hardly probable, they thought, that another raid would be made.

But in this they were mistaken. Not many weeks had passed when it was tried again in the same manner, and in the same manner carried out; but, in this instance, when the rascals sought to sever the cables, to prevent pursuit they met with a balk, and the enraged citizens dashed across and attacked them.

That time only a mere handful of the marauders got away, among them their leader, and nearly all of the booty was retaken. But the leader swore he would return and take dear revenge for the loss he had suffered.

After that a guardsman was stationed at the bridge every night, to give warning of any approach, and there at his post we find him on this moonlight night of which we write.

Several months had passed since the last foray, but nothing further had been heard from "King John," as the ringleader of the brigands was called, and perhaps the watchman was growing a little less vigilant than he had been at first.

Be that as it may, he remained apparently oblivious to the presence of a darker shadow which was creeping stealthily toward him across the bridge.

The watchman was not asleep, but, leaning upon his rifle, was seemingly lost in reverie.

Nearer, and nearer still, crept the dark shadow behind him.

Finally it was near enough almost to touch him, when it rose up, resolving itself into a man.

At that instant the guardsman wheeled suddenly, apparently having felt the presence near him, for certainly no sound had been made to rouse him; and in the same instant his foe sprang upon him.

One fierce hand clutched his throat; there was a flash of steel in the dim light, and the next moment the guardsman was sent headlong into the yawning chasm!

No outcry had been made, or scarcely a sound that could be heard a dozen paces away, and, his terrible business done, the assassin hastened back the way he had come.

The camp slumbered on in fancied security.

In a few minutes a line of black forms appeared at the bridge and began to cross, men on foot and men on horseback, the horses having their hoofs heavily muffled that they might not be heard.

Crossing the bridge, these fellows divided into two companies and proceeded to surround the camp. There must have been a hundred of them at least. Finally the last one had crossed and all disappeared from sight.

Then followed an interval during which nothing was seen or heard of them.

But it was not for long. Soon a wild chorus of wilder yells arose on every hand, accompanied by a scattered volley of shots, and out into full view sprang men and horses.

They were now unmuffled, and the tramping of shod feet and thunder of hoofs served to add to the confusion that had ensued. Men were pouring from every cabin and shanty in haste—each with weapons in hand.

Down upon them charged the invaders, closing in on every side save that nearest the bridge, shooting down the citizens with less compunction than a band of wild Sioux might have shown. The yelling, the firing, commingled with the groans of the wounded and dying made the night hideous, and it required only a few moments of such work to throw the camp into complete panic.

There was a mad rush for the bridge, the only side left open and the only avenue of escape, but a man dropped at every step and they who reached the bridge unharmed were few.

In five minutes it was all over and the invaders were in possession of the camp, while the rightful owners were dead, dying, or dispersed.

Only a few of the desperadoes had been cut down, and the rest were jubilant over their success. A wild cheer went up, as the circle closed in between the buildings and the bridge.

Just then a woman's wild scream was heard, in the direction of the buildings.

"Father!" was the call. "Father! Where are you, father? Wretches! May the curse of Heaven rest upon you if you killed my father!"

The outlaws had looked round at the first cry, and there in the moonlight they saw a girl, her hair in wild disorder, her eyes dilated with fear and horror, yet beautiful in spite of all.

In response to her cry a man among the wounded raised himself up and with an effort shouted:

"They have done for me, Roxy, the hell-hounds! Make for the bridge; it is your only chance. Kill the first man that blocks your way!"

Already the girl was running toward the direction of the well-known voice, fear lending wings to her flight, and as she ran she called:

"No, no! There is no escape, father! Kill me with your own hand, rather than leave me to my fate here!"

"Not much, me purty lass!" cried one man, and he dashed out to intercept her flight.

There was a flash, with the crack of a weapon, and he was tumbled out of the saddle, while the girl ran on without a pause.

"Stop her!" ordered the leader of the band, King John himself. "Ten dollars to the man who takes her and brings her to me!"

There was instantly a dash, the weapon in the girl's hand spoke spitefully two or three times, and then she was surrounded and overcome.

"Kill me, father; kill me, kill me!" the girl screamed. "Can't you kill me? Junius! Junius! Oh God! is he, too, dead? Is there not some friendly hand to send a bullet through my heart?"

Another among the wounded, apparently just recovering consciousness, raised himself at the piercing cry, and with an effort sprang to his feet. Near him stood the horse whose saddle the girl had so recently emptied, and he laid hold upon the rein and climbed to its back.

His efforts, together with the urgency of the demand, had restored him out of his stunned state, and with a revolver tightly gripped in his right hand he dashed forward with a yell straight at the band, with a mad resolve to attempt the impossible. A shout of defiance greeted his coming, half a hundred of empty revolvers clicked, two or three weapons "barked," and a bullet stinging his horse, the animal turned and dashed madly across the bridge, carrying the unwilling rider away from certain death.

CHAPTER. II.

WAS IT PROVIDENTIAL?

A MAN on a mule was making his way slowly along over a well-worn trail, apparently at peace with himself and all the rest of mankind.

He was, judging him by his face alone, a young man not many years exceeding thirty. It was a bold, fearless face, with a pair of dark, magnetic eyes, and was one to be called good-looking.

But if it came to judging him by his dress as well, then he became almost a nondescript, for his garments were a size too large for him, were ragged where they were not patched, and belonged to a style which might be said to have antedated the "old lang syne."

He was whistling a snatch of some popular air as he rode along, and danger seemed to be far from his mind.

Of a sudden he stopped his whistling, and hitching around in his saddle looked back along the trail over which he had just come.

Some sound had caught his quick ears.

At first nothing was to be seen, but the man drew rein and waited, and presently around a far distant bend came a horseman almost completely enveloped in a cloud of dust.

"I thought I was not mistaken," the man on the mule said to himself. "My ears do not often play me tricks. Whoever that fellow is he is in a hurry, and I guess I'll draw back here and wait for him to come up. It may be a crazy Sioux on my trail, for what I know."

With that he backed his mule a little off the trail and waited.

The horseman came on, and presently the man on the mule could make out what manner of man he was.

That the horse was almost jaded was plain. The man was bareheaded and barefooted, and had on no clothes save shirt and trousers. There was blood on his face, into which the dust had settled, making him hardly recognizable as a white.

The man on the mule, taking all this in as the fellow drew nearer, looked again toward the distant bend, expecting to see pursuers dash out into sight; his hand sought a weapon and he prepared to lend a helping hand. But, as no one appeared, he was puzzled.

"What can have happened to the fellow?" he asked himself. "He has been in a scratch of some sort, that is plain, but he seems to be in no particular danger just now. Maybe he is crazy. I think I'll stop him and satisfy my curiosity."

Touching the mule he moved out to the middle of the trail again, and the mad rider being then at hand, shouted:

"Whoop! Hold on, there, friend, and give your horse a breath!"

At sound of the voice the man on the horse gave a start, drew up on the rein with the

same movement, and the panting horse gladly stopped.

"What's your haste?" the man on the mule inquired. "Where do you come from? Where are you going? What sort of scrimmage have you been in? You look as though you have been having a set-to with the Sioux."

"Worse than that, sir," was the response. "King John, the outlaw, and his band, descended upon our camp last night and did a wholesale massacre. I'm about the only one to get away alive, so far as I know, and I'm riding to the nearest town to get up a party to wipe him out."

The man on the mule gave vent to a low, significant whistle.

"Where was your camp?" he asked.

"Up there in the range, place called Rope Walk."

"Never heard of the place. And you say they wiped you all out?"

"Yes; I don't believe half a dozen got away; I don't know of one. But, I must push on."

"You'll gain time, pard, by stopping right here and giving that beast an hour's rest. He'll drop with you if you urge him five miles further. Besides, I want to hear all about this affair; I may be able to help you."

"I suppose you are right; but, my God! how can I stop when the woman I love is in the power of such devils?"

"Your wife?"

"No; but a girl whom I hoped to make my wife."

"That's rather rough, I admit, but you can't gain anything by trying to do the impossible. Everything depends on your horse, and you must spare the brute."

This the man knew, had known it before, but he had been pushing on and on in the hope that the animal might hold out. He now dropped the rein and slid from the saddle, something like a groan escaping him.

"Are you badly hurt?" asked the man on the mule.

"No; it's nothing but a bullet-cut on the scalp. It laid me out for a minute or so when I got it, and it has bled pretty freely, but it's nothing."

"What's your name?"

"Junius Belland."

"Well, tell me your story, and, as I said, I may be able to help you."

"How can you help me? What can one man do against such a horde of such diabolical wretches? I believe there are a hundred of them."

"No matter; let me have the particulars, anyhow."

"Well, I may as well do that, for now I can only see how nearly done up my horse really is, and it will help kill the time while he gets his wind."

The man took a seat upon a little hillock by the wayside, and began his story, giving first a brief sketch of Rope Walk and its warfare against King John and his band.

"Jim Bonhame was mayor of the camp," he narrated, "and his daughter Roxaline, or Roxy, is the girl of whom I spoke. No better or truer girl ever lived. Would to God that I could have killed her, rather than to leave her with those devils! But, if they harm one hair of her head they'll rue it—oh, they'll rue it!"

"You see, the camp turned in last night as usual, with one man on guard at the bridge, and everybody went to bed to sleep. It must have been some time after midnight when we were awakened by the wildest shouting and shooting imaginable, and every man jumped into his breeches and weapons and got out to defend the camp. But, it was too late."

"Somehow the hellions had done away with the man at the bridge, and had got across, and when we got out they opened fire on us and shot us down like dogs. I must have got my dose pretty early in the fight, and I couldn't have been senseless long, but when I came to it was about over. I heard Jim shoutin' to Roxy, as though I was dreaming, telling her to escape by the bridge. Then she answered, saying there was no escape, and asking him to kill her."

"That brought me back to what was going on, and when the girl began to call me, begging me to kill her, I came to myself with a rush. I roused up, found a horse—this same brute—right near me, and I got hold of him and got into the saddle. I could see at a glance there was no hope to rescue Roxy and escape with her, so I made up my mind to kill her and die with her. I dashed at them with that intention, but I can see now how mad it was. If their weapons had been loaded they would

have riddled me before I'd taken the second leap.

"As it was, they all tried to shoot, but most of their guns were empty and only a few went off, and one of the bullets taking the horse in the flank there, he wheeled about and carried me over the bridge and into the defile in spite of myself, and so it comes that I am here. My resolve, as I said, was to kill the girl, and then to give up my life fighting. Well, I stopped the horse, finally, and turned back to the edge of the rift, where, in the deep shadow, I could see without being seen. They had disarmed Roxy and were taking her away, and the distance was too great for me to fire then."

"Besides, I had changed my mind. I believed that Providence had had a hand in my escape, and that I had a work to do. Perhaps if I hastened for help I might be able to get back and rescue her before harm had come to her. At any rate I might be in time to find the devils still there and so avenge their monstrous crime. To make another effort then to rescue her would have been to invite certain death, for undoubtedly every man of them had reloaded his weapons. With regard to effecting her escape through death it was the same; they would have laid me out before I could come near her. Not only, then, did my change of mind determine my action, but the impossible was in the way. I started, and I have not stopped once till now."

"Truly, the sons of Hell!" the man on the mule vented his feelings. "They deserve the worst that can befall them. I'll take a hand in this game, Mr. Belland."

"But, what can you do?" the other asked.

"I'll go there to that camp, if you can direct me the way, and I'll try to defend that girl until you can get back with help."

"Are you mad?"

"Not more so than usual, I guess."

"In heaven's name, then, who and what are you, to propose such a step?"

"Well, my name is Richard M. Bristol, but I am better known as Deadwood Dick, Junior."

The other evidently recognized the name, for he gave a start upon hearing it, but for a moment he could only sit and stare at the Prince of Detectives.

Suddenly he sprang up, and stepping forward, seized Dick's hand and pressed it warmly.

"I have heard of you, Deadwood Dick," he said, "and now I am sure Providence sent me here. No other man in the world would dare do what you have just proposed."

"Nonsense!" waived Dick. "I have been in bad places before. Be that as it may, I am going to Rope Walk, and if your sweetheart is still alive I'll do my best to defend her, in some way or other, or to aid her to escape. I shall have to be governed by circumstances."

"But, suppose you are recognized—"

Dick answered that with a shrug of his shoulders.

"It will be death to you—certain and cruel death!" the other added. "No, you had better aid me in getting a force. And yet, Roxy—"

"That is the point. The girl is there in that den of wolves without a single protector, and that is where I am wanted, if anywhere. Yes, I'll go there, come what may of it, my friend, that is my duty, now."

"God be your protector, then, Deadwood Dick—true heart and brave soul that you are, God be with you!"

"I believe he will be!"

"Then I will press on, raise as large a company as I can, and get back as quickly as possible."

"Yes, do that. You must spare your horse, though. You will lose him unless you do. I would offer to exchange with you, but that animal would be recognized by the band."

"I'll do the best I can. Maybe I'll find a chance to effect an exchange for a fresh one—"

"Have you money?" Dick interrupted.

"No, but—"

"Here, then," bringing to light a wad of bills from some part of his ragged raiment, "take this. Buy at any price the first fresh horse you see, and press on. I will try to hold the fort until you arrive. Now, direct me the way!"

CHAPTER III.

DOINGS AT ROPE WALK.

It was an hour after the merciless massacre when we look again upon the scene at Rope Walk.

Nothing of the awful crime remained, save dark stains here and there on the ground. Every body had been removed, the convenient gorge having no doubt proved a handy grave for all.

The outlaws were assembled on the open space between the buildings and the bridge, their horses having been put away, and their leader, King John, was about to address them. He was mounted upon a box in the center of his admiring horde of fiends, and the brilliant moonlight was over all.

An evil-looking band it was.

There was congregated every stamp of villain to be found in the wild Southwest, ruffians of every grade.

Nearly all bore the imprint of rum and riot, the leader being no exception, though he was a young man and one who, under favorable conditions, might have been called good-looking.

King John was an outlaw who was disclaimed alike by the States and Mexico, but the worst punishment either country had been able to inflict, thus far, had been to drive him across the border line. A price was upon his head in both countries, but the man was feared not only along the border but in camps far inland.

"Well, my good boys," he said, looking over his hand from his position on the box, "we fixed them, didn't we?"

"That's wot!" was the responsive shout.

"And now this camp of Rope Walk is ours. You all know the history of the place, for I have told you. I swore I would come back and wipe them out, and I have done it. Now, I nominate myself for mayor. Who is going to vote for me?"

He was immediately elected by wild acclaim.

"That settles it," said the chief. "I'm going to rule, too, you can bet!" he added. "My word is going to be the law, and the first galoot to go contrary to law will get a bullet. You all know me well enough to understand that I mean what I say. We are going to settle right here and hold the fort."

Cheering greeted that announcement.

"We can do it," King John went on. "We could hold the place against an army. We'll work the mine and make our stake, and when we are done we'll light out the same as we have lighted in."

"What if they bring ther sojers and cut off ther trail?" questioned one fellow who foresaw that possibility.

"We don't care if they do," the leader declared. "That hole down there has an outlet somewheres, and if worst comes to worst we can make a rope ladder and get out that way between two days. There's one thing that must be done, though, and that right away."

"And what's that?"

"The bridge must be cut loose from the other side and a drawbridge made of it. If these fellows had done that they would have blocked my game, but I guess they hadn't thought of it. We can do it, but we may have to tear down a building to get the timber to do it with. Then we can laugh at them if they come to oust us. Oh! I have a bead on my shoulders, my fine fellows!"

The cheering attested their belief in the statement.

"And then we have got another trump card in hand," the chief went on to say, "the best one of all."

"What's that?"

"The girl."

"Hooray! That's so. King John knows what he's doin', you bet!"

"Yes, I know what I'm doing, boys. Let them come for us if they want to, and we'll put her in the front ranks. They won't want to kill her, and so we'll have the bulge on 'em bad."

"But, who is ter have the gal?" one miserable-looking wretch asked. "Are we goin' ter draw lots—"

The revolver of the chief spoke, and the fellow fell dead in his tracks!

"There's your chance!" King John said grimly. "Pitch him over the edge there, boys. He ought to have known the Wild Rose was mine, without question. I have only put him out of his misery, for he was 'most dead, anyhow. Does anybody else want a chance?"

Evidently no one else did.

"Yes, I'll take care of the Wild Rose," the king announced, as he put away his weapon. "Did you disarm her and tie her hands so that she can't harm herself?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. She will keep till morning, when I'll have an interview with her and see how she feels about becoming the Queen of King John! Ha! ha! Now we must see about the alterations at the bridge."

The moon was by this time shining directly down upon the bridge, so that they could see to work, and under the directions of one man who had been a machinist, the task was undertaken,

the chief of the band remaining upon the ground to oversee it.

Thus they busied themselves until the descending moon withdrew its light, when they threw themselves upon the ground near the bridge and slept.

When daylight dawned the preparatory work at the bridge was found to have progressed so far that it was believed the structure could be finished before noon, and preparations were made to push it forward.

Tools of all kinds were found, and everything needful, and after a hasty breakfast the ruffians set at work with a will.

They realized that, to a certain extent, their safety depended upon speed.

It was immediately after breakfast that King John paid a visit to the cabin which was pointed out to him as the one where the Wild Rose had been lodged for the night.

The door had been secured on the outside, and as she had been left with her hands bound it was pretty certain that she had been safely kept.

King John unfastened the door, threw it open, and stepped boldly in, with a swaggering air, but suddenly stopped short, as thoroughly surprised a rascal as could well be imagined.

On the opposite side of the room stood the girl, not only free, but with a rifle to her shoulder, so aimed that the inhuman brute looked straight into its threatening tube.

"Thunder!" he ejaculated. "Point that thing some other way, girl!"

"Murderer," was the response, "if you move a hand before I give you leave, I'll drop you where you stand."

King John laughed lightly.

"Well, pretty one," he said, "you do seem to hold the best hand, that's the fact. What can I do to give you pleasure?"

"Monster! As if there could be pleasure in this world for me. But, I will tell you what you can do, what you shall do. Lead me out from here, across the bridge, and away. Refuse, and you die now!"

"But, miss, the bridge—"

"I will hearken to no excuse. Turn about and lead the way at once. And at the first word or signal to your men, you shall fall. I am a desperate woman, and I will not hesitate to shoot. Do you hear what I say?"

Roxy Bonhame, little more than a child in years, had suddenly grown to a woman in mind.

Her attitude became even more threatening as she spoke, and the wretch before her grew pale in spite of his iron nerves.

"Impossible," he said quickly, "for the bridge is down."

"The bridge down?" in an accent of dismay.

"Exactly. There is no means of crossing the rift at present, no matter how willing I might be to serve you."

The girl's face betrayed the despair she felt, but her rifle still covered the man before her in a dangerous way, and her fingers toyed with the trigger.

"You are telling me the truth?" she insisted.

"I am," was the answer. "You can step here to the door and see for yourself that it is so."

"And give you the chance to overcome me? I'll take your word for it, and there is but one thing for me to do now, and that is to carry out my first intention."

"And what was that?"

"To kill you, murderer of my father! and then to shoot myself."

"Don't be too hasty, miss. You have not given me a chance to explain the object of my visit."

"Well, I give you the chance now. You have one minute to live."

The outlaw was still pale, but he nerved himself to the task before him, that of dissuading the girl from her purpose.

"Tell me how you got free, and where you got that rifle," he parleyed.

"That does not matter, and you only waste precious time by asking such questions. If you have anything to say, say it quick."

"Well, I have this to say: I came here with the intention of setting you at liberty and giving you the freedom of the camp, and it will be death to the man who offers you harm or insult!"

The girl's face softened a little.

"How can I believe you?" she asked.

"I can prove it to you," was the reply. "I do not make war against women. You are perfectly safe here, and when that bridge has been replaced you shall be allowed to take your leave. I swear it."

"When will it be done?"

"By noon."

"Very well; sit down there by the door and we will wait for it. I can keep you covered during that time, and when it is done you can lead me across in the way I first directed. Your men will come to find you, when you remain here too long, and you can then tell them what the arrangement is."

Every word had the ring of deadly purpose, and the brigand felt that he was badly cornered.

"Very well," he said quietly; "I see that I must obey."

He sat down on the seat indicated, and the girl seating herself on her side of the room, the long wait was commenced.

In about an hour a man came to find King John, and entered with the observation that he supposed the chief was finding it so pleasant there that he hated to tear himself away.

At sight of the rifle, though, he paled, and took in the situation at once. The chief told him of the plan, that he was to conduct the girl over the bridge as soon as it was ready, and ordered that no man should interfere with the girl. But, at the same time he managed to make a signal to the man which Roxy did not notice.

CHAPTER IV.

KING JOHN'S FORT.

ROXY BONHAME held the best hand in the game, and she knew it, but she did not know how to play to her own best interests.

Delay was dangerous, as she ought to have known. True, if the bridge was down there was no escape from the plateau, but now that King John's unpleasant dilemma was known to his men she might have expected interference on their part.

Remaining in the cabin she could not tell what was going on without. She should have marched her prisoner out to the edge of the gorge, and there kept him under cover till the bridge was ready. That would have been to expose herself to a shot, of course, but she preferred death to remaining there.

An hour passed, another, and yet two more, and still the girl kept the man under the steady cover of her rifle.

King John was fuming like a caged lion, but there did not seem to be any help for him. That deadly rifle, with the girl's finger eternally on the trigger, was a constant menace.

Several times he had tried to divert her attention, but she was equal to him each time. Once several men had come near the door, where they stopped to talk in low tones, but the girl directed King John to order them away, and he had to do so, much as it went against the grain.

Meanwhile the work at the bridge had been going steadily on, as could be heard from the cabin.

Finally the noise of the tools ceased, and a cheer was heard.

About the same time some one without called to the outlaw chief to apprise him of the fact that the bridge was done.

"You hear?" spoke the determined girl. "Get up, now, face around, and conduct me straight out and across. If you so much as turn your head or make a sign with either hand, I'll drop you."

"There's no use kicking when the joker is trump," King John growled.

He obeyed the order, got upon his feet and turned to the door, and the Wild Rose placed the nose of her rifle against the back of his neck.

In that manner they started to leave the cabin.

King John stepped out, and in the same instant a stick struck the girl's rifle underneath with force, knocking the muzzle high in the air, and it went off.

At the same time men sprang upon her from each side of the door, where they had been lying in wait, and she was speedily rendered a helpless prisoner once more, after all her pluck and patience.

"Ha! ha! ha!" the outlaw chief laughed. "How do you feel now, you wildcat! I will square accounts with you for this forenoon's business, you bet."

"What shall we do with her?" asked his men.

"You had better kill me, and that at once," cried the girl. "If you do not, I will do it myself the first chance I get. I am desperate."

"Ha! ha! I care little how desperate you are," declared the chief. "I'm going to make you my wife when I get time, and you'll be queen of this band, as I am king."

"Never!"

"You can't help yourself, my lady."

"I will show you. Death will take me out of your hated power."

"We are not going to leave you any means of killing yourself, though. I am going to search you while my men search this cabin, and we won't leave you so much as a pin."

"If there is no other way, I'll hold my breath till it kills me."

"Ha! ha! ha! You are welcome to try that on, if you want to. I think you will give it up. Besides, that lover of yours will surely come back to rescue you, if he got off."

The girl started, as if wondering if this man could read her thoughts.

That had been her main hope, that Junius had got away alive and that he would come back again and rescue her.

She knew he had not run away willingly, leaving her to her fate, for she had seen him trying madly to check the horse; but, having been carried beyond reach, she understood full well how impossible it had been for him to return with any hope.

But she knew, if alive, he had hastened for help, and upon that she had builded her only hope.

"He will not return, unless at the head of a detachment of soldiers to wipe you off from the face of the earth," she responded defiantly. "He knows well that he will only find me dead—that I will take my life with my own hand, somehow—anyhow. And my blood be on your heads!"

"That does not trouble us. A little more or less is of no moment. But, you are standing in your own light, for I did not mean to leave you with your hands tied. I have no desire to be too rough with you. Better promise that you will not do anything rash, and I'll leave your hands free so that you can attend to your wants. We don't intend to starve you, and you have not had breakfast yet."

The girl was sullenly silent.

To have her hands free was what she wanted. She could do nothing with them tied.

King John directed his men to make a thorough search of the cabin and remove everything with which the girl could possibly harm herself, and while that was being done he searched her person.

After his men, he searched the interior of the cabin himself, and satisfied at last, ordered the girl returned.

"There you are, my sweet Wild Rose," he said, "and if you want to kill yourself by holding your breath, go ahead; you will not find any other means. I'll send you something to eat and drink at once."

They locked the door upon her and went away.

Roxy was glad enough to be alone, for she was well-nigh exhausted with her long and trying vigil, and throwing herself upon the floor she wept aloud.

"That ar' gal is goin' to keep her word, King John," one of the horde made remark as the chief and his men moved away from the cabin. "Ye kin see et in her off eye that she means biz."

"I'm afraid she will attempt it," the chief admitted. "And that will be bad, for she's our trump card, or will be if we're attacked."

"Can't ye play a cute dodge on her?"

"How?"

"Make her think she's got a friend in th' camp."

"I don't see how you would do that. She knows mighty well she hasn't, and that's the end of it."

"Don't know 'bout that ar'. Et don't take much ter kindle hope when a feller is in a tight box. S'pose ye drop a sort of note in to her on ther sly, tellin' her to brace up, or somethin' like et?"

"Duff, you have struck it!" cried the chief. "I'll try that trick right off and see what will come of it."

This fellow, "Duff," was King John's lieutenant, and was about the only one who ever ventured to offer his chief any advice. King John knew his worth.

Accordingly, the ringleader of the horde penciled a note on a scrap of paper, and one of the rascals was sent to make a hole in the roof and so drop it to the imprisoned girl.

That note was none too soon to accomplish its purpose.

Believing now that all hope was lost, the Wild Rose was preparing to take her life.

She was tearing strips from the bottom of her skirt with which to hang herself, for death was preferable ten times over to life with these murderers; when a noise on the roof claimed her attention.

She looked up and listened, pausing in her work of deadly intent.

There was a scraping, chipping sound for a few moments, and then a ray of light could be seen through an opening that had been made.

Wondering what it could mean, the girl watched it breathlessly. The light was soon shut out, then something white appeared through the hole, and the next moment a piece of paper came fluttering down.

"It must be a friend!" she exclaimed under her breath. "But, he will surely be discovered there."

As soon as the paper fell she had it. It was a note.

She read with eager haste:

"Keep your courage and strength. A friend is here to help you if he can. Do not despair. If you get this and will try to hold out, give me the signal by three raps."

There was no address and no signature, but she believed she recognized the writing.

"It is Junius!" she told herself.

She tore the note up and pushed it through a crack in the floor, and then gave the required signal.

There was a similar response from the roof, followed by the same noise that had at first drawn her attention, and next she heard the man leap lightly to the ground at the rear of the cabin.

"Yes," she said to herself, "now I will live. If Junius is here he will kill me rather than see me come to harm. I know I can trust him, and may God protect him from harm himself. Half an hour more and I would have been beyond earthly reach, for my resolve was taken."

When the rascally tool of the chief dropped to the ground, he ran lightly away and joined his master.

"Well?" King John interrogated.

"She bit," was the response. "She gev ther sign, right up in prime order."

"Hal hal ha! That was a pretty clever idea of yours, Duff. She'll keep now 'till we get things in running order here. How is the bridge?"

"It works to a charm. Come and see et."

They went over to the edge of the chasm, where the bridge was, and where a big framework had been erected to support the draw.

The bridge was down and in place, and a crowd of men was on it to test its strength. It was as strong as it had been before. And noting that, King John ordered it raised.

Two men set about the work, and in a few seconds the further end of the bridge was swung up and the chasm was impassable.

"How is et?" demanded the master of construction.

"It is immense," was the chief's approval. "Now we are safe from attack."

"You ar' right, and we could hold the hull United States Army at bay here. We hev come ter stay, I sh'd opine."

The bridge was left drawn up, and dinner was the next thing in order with the villainous crew. After that was over they set down to the business of living.

The cabins and shanties were disposed of by lot, a proprietor was appointed for the one hotel of the camp, and likewise the saloon, store, and other interests. The chief reserved for himself the management of the mine.

Before night they were quite at home, and the camp looked as orderly and law-abiding as any that could be mentioned.

CHAPTER V.

A COMPACT FOR MUTUAL VANTAGE.

THE stage from Rock Rift to Whoop-Up had three passengers to set down at the junction where the by-trail led up to the camp of Rope Walk.

It was late in the afternoon when the stage reached that point, and by the time the passengers could walk from there to the camp it must be pretty near night, for it was quite a distance.

One of the passengers mentioned was a woman, two were men.

The woman was a trim little body, not bad-looking, but she had red hair and a very pointed nose. That she was no "tenderfoot" was plain from her dress and manner.

She was about twenty-two years old, at a guess, was plain and serviceably dressed, and had no baggage except a little bag which she carried in her hand. She had already shown that she was quite able to take care of Number One.

One of the men mentioned was riding inside, and he was a tenderfoot of the very tenderest sort. He was a dude. His name was Darby

Sutcliffe, and he was "doing" the West, alone. He had tried to modify his dress to suit his surroundings, but he looked scared under his big hat and seemed lost without a cane-head to suck.

The other man was a passenger on top.

He was a Westerner, and to the manner born. About thirty years of age, he had the bronzed complexion peculiar to the Southwest, and was clad in accordance. He was not bad-looking, but there was an unpleasant glitter about his eyes.

When the stage stopped at the junction this man was the first on the ground.

"Jest open the door, will ye, pardner?" called out the driver. "Thar's a couple inside fer ther same place."

"Two more for Rope Walk?" queried the man, in surprise.

"Yas; and one of them a woman. You ar' goin' to have company up thar, pard. Take keer of ther gal."

The man opened the door while the driver was speaking, and the dude was the first to step out, to the evident surprise of the Westerner.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "You going to Rope Walk?"

"Yes, sir," was the response. "I heard back at the last station what a very peculiar place it is, and as I am doing the West I must not miss it."

"My advice to the likes of you is to stick close to the main trail," was the laconic observation. "But et's no funeral of mine, I reckon. Step out of ther way and let the lady out."

The dude had stopped short to hear what the man had to say, and had forgotten the woman for the instant.

At this reminder he jumped aside, doffed his big hat in a clumsy fashion, and said:

"I beg your pardon, lady. This rough fellow addressed me, and I quite forgot I was standing in your way."

"Oh! that's all right," said the woman, as she lent her hand to the Westerner and sprung out. "And if you will take a word of advice from me you will speak of every man as a gentleman, whether he wears his pants in his boots or not."

At that the dude looked horrified, and the other passengers laughed.

"All out an' clear?" asked the driver.

"Yes; go on with your hearse," responded the Westerner.

"Wal, take keer of yerself, pard, and take keer of ther gal," ther driver rejoined, and he gathered in his reins and cracked his whip and the stage went lumbering and clanking on its way.

No sooner had the stage gone than the dude looked lonesome.

"Bless me!" he ejaculated. "What a horrible country it is to be sure. Do you know the way to that camp, my friend?"

That to the Westerner.

"Never was thar in my life, pard," was the response. "Hev you been there before, lady?"

"Never, sir."

"Good heavens!" cried the frightened dude. "Then we are lost. I supposed the camp would be in sight from the place where the stage stopped. Here is nothing but a howling wilderness!"

The woman and the Westerner laughed at him.

"I don't call et lost very bad," the latter observed. "The trail is plain enough, ain't et? This is the main trail, and of course this other must be the one to Rope Walk. Let's lope off."

He started as he spoke, the little woman right with him, and the dude was left to stare after them.

It took him but a moment, however, to make out that "lope off" must be synonymous with "start forward," and he ran after them and caught up.

"Your pardon, lady," he said, "but will you permit me to carry your bag?"

He had a grip of his own to lug along, but that did not stand in the way of his being properly courteous.

"Thanks, I don't care if you do," was the prompt acceptance, and the little woman made an immediate surrender of the article in question.

She and the Westerner then walked on together, while the dude plodded after them with the baggage.

"What's your handle, pard?" the woman presently asked of her companion.

"Penn Haycross," was the answer. "What's your own call-by, ef it ain't askin' too much?"

"My name is Francesca Travis. It seems we are both strangers at the place we are heading for."

"Yes; but I guess we'll be able to hold up our end."

"I don't have much doubt about that."

Both laughed lightly, and for a time their conversation was of no moment to our story.

The dude had little to say, except now and then to ask a question. He was clearly "not in it." But he was useful in his way.

By the time they had gone half the distance the girl and Haycross had become quite well-acquainted.

"Might a fellow ask what it is takes you to such an out-of-the-way place as Rope Walk?" Haycross presently inquired, in an easy way.

"A fellow might ask, but might not find out?" was the saucy response.

"Then it's none of his business," the Westerner accepted.

"I won't be rough on you, though," the girl repented. "I have got business there with a fellow named Junius Belland."

"Junius Belland?"

"That's what I said."

"He is the very chap I am going to see."

Francesca Travis looked at him in a surprised and inquiring way.

"What is your business with him?" she bluntly asked.

"Well, now, I don't know about tellin' you that. What is Belland to you anyhow?"

"I think we'd better talk straight and to the point, Mr. Haycross, so I will tell you. He is the man I love."

"Whew!"

"What makes you whistle?"

"I'm afraid you and I ain't going to get along so friendly as we have been, that's all."

"Why not?"

"Well, you say Junius Belland is the man you love; he is the man I hate. I am going to Rope Walk to settle a little score with him."

"It does look as if we must hook horns, that's the fact," said the young woman, quite calmly. "You can count on it that I won't stand by and see Junius Belland hurt."

"Not to be expected you would."

"No; I'm for him and against you, straight out."

They talked in the straightforward Western style; no beating about the bush with them.

"What's between you and him?" the girl added.

"A gal."

"Hol is that so? Say, Mr. Haycross, I don't know but what you and I might work together in this racket."

"Why?"

"Because it's most likely that same gal, as you call her, that I'm going gunning for."

"The devil?"

"That's what I call her in my mind."

"But you are mistaken, badly. Roxy Bonhame is a little angel."

"That's her!" the young woman exclaimed.

"That's the hussy's name! She's the game I'm after."

"Then there's plenty of reason why you and I can't neighbor any more, miss. I won't hear Roxy called any such names as that, and—"

"Well, I'll keep my opinion more to myself. But, as I was going to say about our working this thing together. I've got nothing against you, and I don't see that you can have anything against me."

"Well, that's so."

"And if we can work it so as to part my fellow from your girl, isn't that all we're after anyhow?"

"It wasn't quite all I was after."

"Nor I; but we'll call quits on that. If you get the girl and I get Junius, won't that be enough? No use our going for each other's."

"All, I s'pose we can agree on that," Haycross decided. "I had my mind all made up to lay Belland out, though."

"And I was going to spoil that— But, I 'greed not to call any more names, I believe. Now, you promise to do no harm to Junius Belland and I'll pledge myself not to harm your Roxy."

"Well, I'll do that."

"Then put it there," frankly offering her hand. "If we can't be real good friends we needn't be foes, and if we pull together I think we'll get there."

"I don't see why we shouldn't, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"They have got married already. If that's the case, this 'greement of ours is off."

"If that's the case we must part them, some—"

how," you mean. "But, I don't expect to find it that way. They've only just got engaged."

"How did you know about that?"

"Junius wrote and told me. You see, he and I have corresponded, and I loved him hard. He wasn't bad stuck on me, though, it seems, and when he got engaged he said it was about time for us to quit writin'. But, he didn't know me."

And so they talked on, comparing notes, but bringing out nothing further of importance to us, and the dude walking along behind them was a wondering listener to it all; and finally as day was closing, they came to the place of their destination.

CHAPTER VI.

ENTERING THE SPIDER'S PARLOR.

BEFORE the advent of King John and his horde, Rope Walk had been "no slouch" of a camp.

Anyhow, that was the way it was described when a stranger asked what sort of place it was. And those few words covered the ground pretty well, readily conveying to the average mind that it was a lively and growing "city."

"There was a hotel, the 'No-Name,' that was 'no slouch,' and there was the 'Rooster Saloon,' the most popular resort the camp boasted, and that was certainly 'no slouch.' Taken altogether, that expressive phrase fitted the camp pretty well, and was accepted as legal tender.

And after the massacre the brigands were of the opinion that they had made "no slouch" of a strike.

They had found the camp well provisioned, well-armed and ammunitioned, and best of all, from their point of view, there was a goodly stock of whisky on hand.

King John's second in command, the fellow called Duff, had been put in charge of the hotel, while a great, giant bullwhacker of a fellow, known among them as "Mauler Mose," had been put in authority over the saloon.

The outlaw chief had reserved for himself the office of mayor, and likewise that of manager of the mine, as has been mentioned.

The girl prisoner, the Wild Rose, as they called her, had not been allowed to want for food and drink.

As good a dinner had been given her as the best cook in the band could prepare, and being hungry enough, she had partaken of it liberally.

She was still kept a close prisoner in the cabin, but not bound, and she might have taken her life easily, in spite of all their precautions, had she not been deceived by that note.

Believing that her lover was near her, she had something to live for now, and would do as he had requested in his note. She believed he would rescue her if possible, and that accomplished, they together could work to bring about the avenging of the great wrong.

It was well along in the afternoon, when the rush of business was over with him, that King John paid her another visit.

He opened the door and walked boldly in as before.

After the search that had been made he knew it was impossible that the girl could have got hold of another weapon.

"Well, my Wild Rose," he greeted, "how do I find you by this time?"

"Unhappy enough," was the sullen response.

"It is not my will that you should be that way. I see you have not kept the threat you made that you would take your life."

No response.

"How was that? Did you find it rather hard to hold your breath so long? I thought you would. The fact is, you are too young and pretty to die. I was sure you would not kill yourself."

"I have made up my mind to live, if I can."

"Hal! that is right. Dead folks are not of much account, and are only in the way anyhow."

The girl shivered as his cold words fell upon her unwilling ears, and she recalled the horrors of the previous night.

"Yes, I am going to live," she repeated, grimly. "And if chance ever offers I shall not hesitate to avenge the death of my father at your hands. If you have anything to say to me, say it and begone."

"That is hardly a fair way to treat your protector, my lady. Only for me you would now be dead—"

"Better that I were so!"

"Or worse, I was going to add. Now, I will tell you what I have to say to you. I am going to give you a fair offer. I want you for

my wife, and I will give you twenty-four hours in which to decide whether you will marry me willingly or not."

"I do not need twenty-four seconds to answer that, monster!"

"That does not matter, and it matters little whether you are willing or not, I'll make you mine, anyhow. I only wanted to give you a chance to think it over. Here I am ruler of this camp, with every man of them to answer my beck and call, and you, as my queen, will have the same power—"

"Go!" she cried, pointing to the door, her lithe figure drawn to its full height. "Go, murderer!"

The chief laughed lightly as he watched her.

"That's very good," he said. "You'll do honor to your queenly station. Yes, I'll go, and you may have the time I named to think it over. Willing or not, I make you my bride tomorrow night."

He backed out through the door, secured it carefully, and went his way.

Undoubtedly he would have been less willing to grant this respite to the unhappy girl, but his hand needed the check of his strong arm upon them.

They were inclined to drink too liberally, and were not disposed to accept as willingly as they should have done the laws he had laid down for them. They were required to pay for all they got.

It was for this reason that big Mauler Mose had been set to preside over the saloon. The men feared him, and he was the man for the place.

The chief had divided the spoils of the camp as equitably as he could, and after that division, the way he expressed it, each tub would be required to stand upon its own bottom.

If any man among them went broke, he would have to do the best he could. A fair rate of wages was to be paid to each one, according to the kind of work he performed, but the profits of everything was to go to the chief, who set himself up as king in fact. At the end of the year, though, he promised another division among them.

As though such a place could exist the twelfth part of a year!

John the King had no idea of anything of the sort, however. He had other plans in view for his own ends.

It was later still when his attention was called to the fact that some travelers had arrived at the bridge on the other side of the gorge, who desired to cross and enter the camp.

At this announcement there was every indication of a general stampede in the direction of the bridge, but the chief checked it.

"Don't give yourselves away!" he cried.

"Let every man attend to his business. I'll see to this matter myself. I know better than you what's required."

With that he accompanied the man back to the bridge.

Men had been appointed to watch at the bridge night and day, two at a time, and it was one of those who had brought the word.

When King John came to the bridge he found two men and a woman on the other side. These were, needless to say, Francesca Travis, Penn Haycross, and Darby Sutcliffe the dude.

"Hello!" the chief greeted. "Who are you?"

"Travelers," answered Haycross, shortly.

"We want to get across."

"All right, lower the bridge, men, and we'll take them in. We have to be careful here, strangers."

"I should think so, by the looks of things," said Haycross.

"Yes. You see, we have had a brush with outlaws and Indians two or three times, and we took this plan to keep out unwelcome visitors. The men here have orders to let nobody in till they report."

Haycross was looking keenly around, and did not really fancy the aspect of things.

The outlaw chief saw this, and as though he could read the man's thoughts he went on to say:

"We had quite a fight with a band last night, and as soon as we had got rid of them we set to work at the bridge. You can see it has been put up in a hurry."

By this time the bridge had been lowered to place, and the young woman was half-way across it, followed by the dude.

Against his better judgment Haycross followed them.

As soon as they were over, the bridge was drawn up again, and King John led the way to the hotel.

"Where is Mayor Bonhame?" Haycross asked, as they set out.

"He is away just now," was the answer. "I am acting as mayor in his place till he gets back again."

"Is his daughter with him?"

"No; she is here, but she isn't very well. I take it you have been here before, eh?"

"Never before. What's the matter with Roxy?"

The outlaw chief looked relieved when he found the fellow had never been in the camp before. He would be less likely to note the changes.

"Oh she's only laid up with a cold, or something of that sort," he made reply to the question.

"And where is Junius Belland?" asked the young woman.

"He is away with Bonhame," was the answer given.

They were then at the hotel, and King John led the way into the place, saying as he did so:

"Here's our hotel, strangers, where you will be cared for to the best of our ability. Mr. Duff, the proprietor, will attend to your wants."

With a wave of his hand and a wink at his worthy helper, he passed them over to him.

The "hotel" was only a very small affair, with only one entrance and that directly into the bar-room, though there was no bar there. The saloon had a monopoly in that line.

The young woman went forward at once to the desk, while the dude stood and stared around him, evidently wishing himself elsewhere.

Haycross was keener in his observations than either, and the outlaw chief saw it.

The Westerner was taking notes of the villainous faces around him. There was not a single exception to the rule. Every one bore the stamp of rum and crime.

"What a terrible place!" the dude ejaculated. "It's just so terrible that I'm going to make my stay mighty short," cried Haycross.

With his words he made display of a revolver.

"Why, what's the matter, stranger?" called out Duff.

"Oh! there's nothing the matter, only I think I'll do my business at once and be going."

The young woman had turned in alarm at this, and for the first time seemed to realize the class of men by which they were surrounded, and she moved toward the door.

Just then Haycross felt a cold revolver tube pressed against the back of his neck, the dude the same, and the young woman was no exception. Their hands were ordered up, and in half a minute they had been disarmed.

CHAPTER VII.

DESPERATELY STRAITENED.

"PON me word!" exclaimed Darby Sutcliffe, the dude. "I never received such treatment before in all my life!"

"What does it mean?" cried Francesca Travis, in some alarm. "Has the camp turned into a band of outlaws? Mr. Haycross, what does it mean?"

"It means that we are in a trap," growled the young Westerner. "I had my suspicion that all was not right when we crossed that bridge. There has been trouble here."

The rascals around them were laughing now.

"An' ye want to look out thar ain't more trouble," warned Duff. "I reckon we'll treat ye well ef ye ar' civil to us."

"Who is head of this camp?" demanded Haycross.

"I am acting mayor, sir, as I told you," said King John, with a bow of mock politeness.

"Well, what do you intend to do with us?" asked the young woman.

"We ar' in need o' wives hyer, fer one thing," declared Duff, with a coarse laugh.

The young woman paled.

"You needn't count me in it," she said, firmly.

"We may as well have this thing out here and now," spoke Haycross, determinedly. "You have got the bulge on us, bad."

"Et looks like et," laughed Landlord Duff.

"And that being the case, we can't demand any terms. But, there is no reason why you shouldn't deal fair with us, for I don't suppose you are hankering to kill us, are you?"

"Not at all," assured King John.

"Well, then, there's only one thing you can do."

"What's that?"

"Take what wealth we happen to have about us and let us go."

Seeing the bad dilemma into which he had fallen, the Westerner was glad to ask only his life.

The truth was, now that he had had time to look well around him, he recognized several of the rascals, and knew them for what they were.

"And let you go and bring a force to wipe us out!"

"We are not in position to stand on terms," responded Haycross. "We'll agree to go away and stay away. We can't do any better than that."

"Et might do, fer you two galoots," spoke up Duff, "but we will keep ther gal."

"I'll bet you won't," chipped in the spirited young woman. "I'll jump into the canyon first."

"I'm talking for all three of us," said Haycross. "If one goes all go. If one stays we all stay, and the first one who offers insult to this young woman has got to do it over my dead body."

"Haw! haw!" laughed Duff. "Et won't take more'n half-a-dozen shots ter lay you out."

"But, for fear that wouldn't do et we could pitch in half-a-dozen more," another fellow added.

"You won't kill us, though?" cried the dude. "That would be terrible, you know."

This raised a loud laugh.

"You have heard my say," added Haycross fearlessly.

"I think we'll hold you all," decided King John. "Maybe you'll want to join us when you come to know us better. You'll be allowed to go where you please, except out toward the rift. You can buy what you want, if you have got the necessary."

"Then you intend to keep us here?"

"That's what I said."

"But, don't ye know, it's against the law!" cried the dude.

"I'm all the law there is here just now," declared the chief. "You will be safe if you carry yourselves straight."

"What are we going to do, Mr. Haycross?" asked the young woman.

"We haven't any choice, now," was the response. "The only thing we can do is to stick together."

"I think the lady had better take a room here at the hotel as she intended," suggested the outlaw chief.

"Where is Miss Bonhame?" Francesca asked.

"She is in a cabin here," answered the chief.

"What is the matter with my lodging with her?"

"Company might not be bad for her. Perhaps she'd be glad to have you."

"You said she is sick?"

"I guess she hasn't got anything that she won't get well of. The fact is, she is locked up just now."

"And you said Bonhame and Belland had both gone away?" questioned Haycross.

He feared what had happened, judging by what he saw all around.

"Yes, they have gone away and are not likely to come back," the chief admitted.

"You don't mean to say you have killed Junius Belland, do you?" cried the young woman.

"Bless you, you don't take us for murderers, do you?" responded the rascal.

At that his evil horde sounded another laugh.

By this time a big crowd of them was present. Haycross recognized the uselessness of further debate.

"Well, we can't do better than to take your offer," he said. "We'll stay and behave ourselves, it being understood that we are not to be harmed till we have made up our minds about joining you."

"That's ther ideal!" cried Duff.

"That is understood," King John affirmed. "Keep away from the canyon out there, and don't try any tricks, and you'll be safe. If you try any dodges, you will probably be shot, for I won't stand accountable for what my men may do. You can get lodging here when you want to retire."

"Horrible!" gasped the dude. "Why did I ever come here?"

"I give it up," laughed the chief.

"Well, let's make the best of it," said Haycross, with as cheerful an air as he could assume. "We accept the terms, mayor. Landlord, we want something to eat, anyhow, whether we are prisoners or not. Can you fit us out with supper?"

"I opine we kin scare up somethin' fer ye to chew on. Have ye got ther dudads to ante fer et?"

"Yes, I guess we can scare up enough to pay for it," was the response.

"All right, come into ther next room hyer and squat round ther board, and I'll see to ye."

He indicated a door on the other side of the room, and the three unfortunates passed out into an adjoining room which served the purpose of dining-room.

When they had gone King John gave some orders to his men concerning them, and went out.

The prisoners took seats at the table, and Haycross said in low tone:

"We are in a tight box here, and we have got to keep stiff upper lips if we ever expect to get out of it."

"You are right," agreed the young woman. "It looks as if they have cleaned out the citizens and taken possession themselves."

"That's it," agreed Haycross. "And they are likely to clean us out, too."

"Do you think they'll kill us?" gasped the dude.

"They'll do it as sure as fun, if they take the notion. I wouldn't give a big pile for our lives. But, I wanted to tell you what my plan is going to be, unless I see reason to change it."

"What is it?" asked the girl, eagerly.

"I'm going to pretend to join them to-morrow, if there is no other way, and so try to rescue Roxy if I can."

"And what had we better do?" asked the dude.

"I think you had better not offer to do that, but remain as docile as a lamb and do whatever they tell you to do. You are a tenderfoot, and they wouldn't want you anyhow. Maybe they'll make a cook of you, or dishwasher, or something of that sort."

"Horrible! Horrible!"

"But, you had better submit to it, as I said, for it's your only hope of ever getting out alive."

"And what about me?" asked the young woman.

"I want to make a bargain with you," answered the Westerner.

"What is it?"

They were interrupted by the coming in of their host with something for them to eat.

"I'll tell you," said Haycross, when he had gone. "If you will help me to rescue Roxy I'll do my best to get you out at the same time."

"I'll do it. What's the plan?"

"Well, when I offer to join them it will be on one condition, and that is that you are to be my wife. On that condition you will join, too."

"They would object to that, I am afraid."

"Maybe so, but they might not. And if they didn't, we could play off till we got the chance to slip out of their hands, or else hold out till help comes, for I am sure they are looking for an attack."

"There don't seem to be any other way, that I can see."

"It is the only hope, and a slim one at that. It means life or death for us, and we mustn't be squeamish."

"You'll find that I'm nervy, if it comes to a pinch."

"I can well believe that. So, it is understood. And, if they take me at my offer, you can pretend to marry me."

"I'll do it."

"And you'll keep your word about not doing harm to Roxy?"

"Sure."

"All right. Ask them to lock you up with her, for the night, and that may be safety for both of you."

"Do you think they have killed Belland?"

"I'm afraid they have."

"I wish I knew it for sure."

"Why, what would you do?"

"I'd avenge him, somehow, if I lost my life the next minute."

"You couldn't do it. We haven't the ghost of a show against them that way. Our only hold lies in deceiving them."

They carried on their conversation in low tones while they ate, laying their plans, and when they had done returned to the other room again and fearlessly mingled with the crowd.

They had been there but a few minutes when there was excitement without.

CHAPTER VIII.

DEADWOOD DICK DROPS DOWN.

By this time it was growing dark.

Many lights had been lighted about the camp, and in a brief time all would be needed, for twilight in such a place was a delusion.

The excitement was in the shouting and running to and fro on the part of some of the camp's mongrel denizens, and the cause did not

at once appear. It seemed that no one knew just what was the matter.

"What's all this about?" demanded King John, appearing at the hotel.

"That's what we want ter know," responded one of his men. "Mebby it's somethin' wrong over at ther bridge."

The chief of the brigand horde made haste to put himself where a view in the direction of the bridge was commanded.

When he gained that point he saw a man running toward the camp with a lantern in hand.

Undoubtedly he was one of the guardsmen.

At the same time there arose a voice across the chasm, shouting:

"Hillo! Hillo! Hillo! Whar on airth ar' ye, citizens? What's the matter with ye all! Everybody crazy drunk? Hillo! Hillo! Hillo!"

"It's somebody on the other side wanting to get across," said the leader to those around him.

"All r ght; let him in," said one man. "He'll be one more lamb fer us to fleece."

"I must know something about him first, though," said King John.

By this time the fellow with the lantern was coming up.

"What's King John?" he demanded.

"Right here," was the response. "What's up?"

"Thar's a galoot on t'other side what is belerin' ter come over. What d'ye say to et?"

"Who is he?"

"Don't know his handle; says he's a traveler."

"We'd better tell him to keep right on traveling, then, I think."

"But, he may be worth takin' in," was suggested. "We don't want ter throw away ther chance fer a haul."

"I'll go down there and see what he is," the chief decided.

He led the way with the man carrying the lantern, and in a few moments they were at the bridge.

There were two lanterns there, each watchman having one, and by the light they furnished the outlines of a horseman could be distinguished on the opposite side of the gorge.

The man, whoever he was, had shouted once or twice more.

Penn Haycross, Miss Travis, and Darby Sutcliffe had followed the crowd out of the hotel, and they whispered together about the matter.

They heard the shouting, and the stranger's words could be plainly made out, at that distance.

"It is some poor devil who, like us, is going to get into the trap, sure," observed the young woman, in a whisper.

"Haden't we better warn him?" asked the dude.

"And get shot for it?" Haycross suggested.

"But, we could shout to him, you know, and so turn him back. As to our fate, I suppose that is fixed upon anyhow, so it will make no difference."

"It will make a big difference in the time, though. They would probably drop the man in his tracks who tried it on."

"Do you think they are really so bad?"

"I'm surprised that I am alive yet," declared Haycross, with grim humor.

"Goodness! How perfectly horrible they are, to be sure. I wish I were miles and miles away."

But, to give our attention to the scene at the bridge.

"Who are you?" called out the mayor of the unscribed camp.

"Who am I? Bless yer honest souls, citizens, I answer to ther name of Eli Betts," came back the response. "I'm Eli Betts; every chance I gets, my whistle I wets; or that is to say I do when I ain't sufferin' with chronic inflammation of ther esophagus, which same is ther matter with me now."

The ruffians laughed at his quaint saying and his jolly way of saying it.

"Where are you from?" asked the chief.

"Plague take me if I know where I did start from, now," was the response. "I set out about twenty-five years ago, and been on ther go ever since. Me an' my old mule Cunningham have been on ther move fer many a day."

"Well, then, what's your business?"

"Bless yer honest souls, citizens, how mighty pertickler ye are! Why, I'm as handy at one thing as another. I'm a jack of all trades, but I do jest as little work as I kin, you bet. I take ther stand that ther world owes me a livin', and I put myself to as little trouble as possible to get it."

"Then what brought you here?"

"My old he-haw, this byer old mule Cun-

ningham; mebbly you kin see him ef ye look sharp."

"And you want to come over here?"

"Well, I should say so. Et looks homelike an' cheerful over thar. Out here it is as dry an' barren as a shadderless Sahara."

"Are you alone?"

"No; haven't I told ye that my old mule Cunningham is along? He is one and a half, and I'm half a one, and that makes two of us. Oh! old Eli Betts, his living gets, and pays his debts, an' down he sets, his whistle wets— That is ter say, when he ain't sufferin' as aforesaid. Ye see, I called for somethin' strong t'other day, and they gev me a glass o' sulphuric acid. I tell ye, pards, et almost took ther skin off as et went down, an' I haven't felt quite well sence."

This brought out a roar of laughter, for now quite a crowd had gathered on the other side.

"But, what's ther reason?" the man with the mule asked, wonderingly. "Why ar' ye shut in thar so mighty select? Ar' ye 'fraid somebody will come along and carry ye off? Ef that's the case, don't think et of Eli Betts. I'll bet I'm as honest as ary a man of ye, when I'm asleep. All ye hev got ter do is ter keep an eye on me, an' I won't steal anything that I can't get away with, you bet. Old Eli Betts, he never frets, but allus gets there every time with his boots on. Whoop! That's the sort of a screechin' cattymount I am, every time. But say, ar' ye goin' ter keep me out hyer all night?"

King John was debating whether to let him enter the camp or not.

"I tell ye what," the new-comer added: "Take me in, an' then ef ye don't like my 'pearance, turn me out again. All I want is somethin' to eat and a place to sleep, anyhow."

"I'll bet he's a harmless old cuss," said one of King John's men.

"And mebbly has a boodle in his clothes that would do us good," said another.

"An' we kin quick do him up, anyhow, ef he don't pan out, 'cordin' to what we expect."

"Well, we'll let him across," decided the King. "Stand ready with your guns though, in case any trick is behind this."

The bridge was then lowered, and the man on the mule came over.

"Waal, I be blowed!" he exclaimed, when he had crossed, and he stood and watched the raising of the bridge again. "Ef that ain't a cute trick I wouldn't say so. Is et a guard 'g'in' Injuns, pards?"

"It's a guard against anything on legs," answered King John. "We are a select people here, and we don't admit everybody."

"That's jest the sort o' company I like to fall into. By the way, have ye got a local irrigatin' shop 'round hyer?"

"You bet," was the shout. "Ther Rooster Saloon is open fer biz. We don't deal in anything ez strong as acid, though. We expect every traveler who crosses ther bridge ter set 'em up."

"That's what I was goin' ter p'pose, good citizens," the man on the mule declared. "Lead the way to this temple o' Bacchus o' yourn, and I'll treat the crowd if et takes every cent I can scare up in my old clothes, even if I have to pawn my old bat ter fill up ther measure. I'm Eli Betts, who never lets ther good old vets go dry when I have the stuff to ante; that's the kind of a pickled tarrantler I am! Lead on and I'll do the right thing by ye."

The hilarious crowd led the way, and in a little while they poured into the Rooster Saloon.

Here was Mauler Mose behind the bar, having considerable of rum, his own bad kind, in his "tank" and looking about as ugly as a Malay pirate.

The stranger followed the crowd in, still mounted upon his mule.

"Hol' on thar!" sung out Mauler. "What d'ye mean by comin' in hyer on that critter?"

"What do I mean?" was the retort. "Why, I mean ter treat the hull camp, one an' all; that's what I mean: yourself included, ef ye can hold any more. An' as fer Cunningham, my mule hyer, he gies too."

"Waal, he don't go hyer you bet!" cried Mauler, in vicious mood.

"I'll bet he does, then," declared the stranger. "Come, now, old man, how much will you bet?"

"I'll bet ef you don't git him out of hyer I'll pitch him out, an' you after him."

"Ha! ha! ha! Why, you couldn't pitch his tail out."

"Hol' on, Mose!" others cried. "Don't be rough on him. He's goin' to set 'em up fer one an' all."

"I don't keer what he is goin' ter do," snarled the Mauler, his face purple with anger at being

thus defied. "Ef he don't git that mule out o' hyer in one second I'll bounce 'em both!"

"Slow, old man, slow, slow!" the man on the mule cautioned. "Don't git us riled up, fer ef ye do thar's no knowin' whar et will end. Cunningham is a whole jug o' disaster when he gits a-goin', an' I'm a little lump o' dynamite when ye set me off. I beg of ye take et easy."

But the giant b'ar-bruiser was coming around from behind the counter, now, and it was plain that he meant business.

He was a brute who had to have a fight of some kind about every so often or he was not happy, and it had been a long time since he had had a regular set-to.

"Come down off'n thar!" he cried. "Lead that ar' mule out o' hyer, or I'll take ye down an' rub ye on ther floor till I blister ye all over. Do ye hear me? I'm yaupin' at you."

"Sa-ay," drawled the man on the mule, looking at him calmly, "what's the matter wi' you, anyhow? Do ye git taken this way often? Is et ketchin'? You had better be keeful about r'ilin' me up. I'm Eli Betts, an' when mad I gets, you bet, my pets, I nat'rally lets myself loose in a way that's reckless. When I'm gettin' mad I allus holler, an' I feel myself gettin' that way now. Wayough-yough-ough!"

The yell Eli let out was almost earsplitting.

CHAPTER IX.

DICK ON HIS MUSCLE.

THE man on the mule was a peculiar character.

He had on a flimsy slouch hat, and his head and face presented one great tangle of hair and beard, as though he had not seen comb, brush or scissors in a dog's age.

Then his clothing was ragged and patched and a size too big for him. His stogy boots were worn at the toes and down at the heel. He was dirty, too, looking as though he and soap and water were strangers. He was a hard-looking customer, about as tough a specimen as the worst of those around him.

As he gave vent to that yell he brandished his arms, and the mule frisked up a little, too, shaking its head and flirting its tail.

"Don't come near me!" the man cried. "I kem in hyer as peaceful as a kitten, but I feel myself gettin' riled up to a degree that ain't safe. Better shy off old man, and let me cool down."

"I'll cool ye down, blast ye!" cried the giant; "I'll help ye to git out of yer passion, me scarecrow! I'll tame ye so's ye won't know ye ever had speeret enough in yer hull kerkiss to say sic! to a dog."

"Wayough-yough-ough-gh!"

So the ragged stranger screamed again, and this time he appeared to grow decidedly excited, and the mule the same.

The man pawed and clawed with his arms and legs, while the mule increased its antics, now springing clear from the floor in a playful way, seemingly, but greatly excited.

"I'll show ye!" cried the rum dispenser; "I'll have ye out of yer duds in jest one—"

"Take keer!" cried the man on the mule. "Take keer! Cunningham is gettin' riled, too, an' ef he gets to flirtn' his heels around hyer he'll demolish the hull shebang in about two minutes! Better keep clear from him, boys, and you'd better call off this big booby— Ha! ook out!"

The mule had suddenly kicked with one hind leg in a way that fairly made a crack like that of a whip.

And it hadn't missed the giant by more than a foot, either.

"Don't hold me responsible," the man on the mule cried. "You all know that I kem in hyer as gentle as a lamb, with ther best of intentions, an' I was sot on by this booby—"

"You dare ter call me that name twicet!" cried the big bruiser. "I'll take et out of yer hide, see ef I don't! An' then ef thar's any money in yer rags we'll treat ourselves anyhow. Hey, boys?"

There were some of the giant's followers, those who stood most in awe of him, who agreed to this.

"Don't count yer chicks till ther shells hev cracked," enjoined the stranger. "I hev warned ye, an' now ef ye come ter grief et's yer own fault. Ain't I right, my good citizens?"

"Yas, you ar' right," shouted those who had been eager for the treat.

King John had come in with the rest, but he held his peace.

He had a reason for doing this. He knew what a desperate man the giant was when

fully roused, and that he might even attack him in his blindness.

In which case, it would be necessary to shoot the man down, and he was a fellow he did not care to lose from his band. And, as this new-comer, was nothing to him anyhow, he let the bullwhacker have his way.

But, the Mauler was not having his own way exactly.

In trying to get at the man on the mule he could not seem to keep out of reach of the animal's heels.

The mule kept turning and prancing around, and every now and then he would let out a hoof with the suddenness of a flash, and the giant had all he could do to keep out of range.

The man let out another wild yell more terrible than any yet.

The mule jumped clear of the floor and came down with a force that made the building quiver.

"Better keep him away," the rider warned.

"Ef ye haven't a coroner and a coffin handy, keep him off. I'm gettin' that mad that thar's nothin' kin hold me ef I get one degree madder!"

"Hyers what kin hold ye, right hyer!" yelled the bullwhacker. "Let me oncet git holt of ye, an' I'll show ye ef I can't! Come down off'n that ar' ornery mule an' see how quick I'll shine up ther floor with ye! Only let me get in, an' I'll pitch you an' ther mule out together!"

"Do ye hear?" cried the rider. "Hear what he says, good citizens? If I git down thar an' give him what he wants, will ye see thet et's a fair scratch?"

This tickled the crowd at once.

"Yes!" was shouted.

"Yes! Yes!"

"All right, I'll do et. I'm Eli Betts, an' I'm a stem-winder of ther latest pattern. I didn't come hyer to fight, but to treat an' be peaceable, but I've been sot on, an' now I'm goin' to sot back again. All I ask is fair play, an' ef I don't make a mess of this hyer big brayin' booby then I'll give ye my head fer soup."

"Come on!" shouted Mauler. "I'll tend ter you first an' then ther mule. I want ye ter know that when I say a mule don't go et don't go."

"But, this one is goin' all the time. If you don't believe it, let him get a crack at ye—"

"Come down hyer an' let me git a crack at you, an' see ef you won't go—"

"Yas, down an' at him!"

"We'll see fair play!"

"Best man on top!"

"No favor to either!"

"That's all I want," asseverated Mr. Betts. "That's all I ask. Look out fer ther mule when I light off, an' see that he don't demolish ther hull ranch. Now I'm fer ye, you big galoot!"

With that, and a yell that was simply terrible, the man sprung straight up from the saddle and came down upon his feet, directly in front of the saloon-keeper.

The latter was a full head the taller, and it looked as though he would make short work of the daring new-comer.

"Now I've got ye!" he cried, as he reached out to grip the muleteer.

But, he did not succeed.

Mr. Betts knocked his ponderous arm away with a quick, sharp stroke, and the next instant grappled with him.

There was a brief struggle, when up went the legs of the Mauler, almost hitting the ceiling, and down he came upon his head with a terrible thud.

"Where have ye got me?" cried the stranger. "Come an' show me whar! I'm ready fer ye now, an' ef ye don't watch out I'll spread ye all over the floor 'fore ye ar' 'ware of et!"

Another wild yell followed.

The crowd was amazed and more. Here was a surprise for them such as they had never dreamed of.

They had seen the best men in their band tackle the Mauler, but not one of them, or for that matter any two together, had ever been able to overcome him. Yet, he was downed at last by this vagabond stranger.

King John gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise.

"I'll show ye whar I've got ye!" bellowed the bruised bruiser. "I'll eat ye up, fer that trick! Ye took me foul or ye couldn't never 'a' done et!"

He was scrambling up with all haste as he blurted out his vengeful threats.

"Mind I don't take ye foul ag'in, then," warned the stranger. "Ye ar' gettin' me warmed up now, and thar's no tellin' whar I'll stop. Don't run up ergainst me too hard, that's all."

"I'll run clear through ye!" bellowed Mr. Mauler. "I'm goin' ter tear ye clean apart an' feed ye to ther dogs! I'm goin'—"

"An' thar ye go!"

Mr. Betts had given him a tap on the proboscis that sent him reeling back into the crowd.

The outlaw horde cheered madly at that.

It made little difference to them which man got the better of it, so long as they had the fun.

But, then, there was a good part of the crowd who were really glad to see the Mauler "done up" at last, and it made no difference who did it. The stranger was already a favorite with these.

"Sock et to him!" cried one.

"Do him up brown fer keeps!"

"You ar' a chief, stranger!"

These cries and many more greeted Mr. Betts's performance.

"I told him what would happen," the stranger cried. "He has roused ther sleepin' tiger in me, an' he must take the consequences. Come an' see me agin, you big-mouthed brawler, you! an' see me send ye to ther floor quicker'n quick. Hyer's old Samson ready fer ye," shaking his right fist, "an' hyer's Goliath ready ter back him up," brandishing his left.

The mule, the while, was standing by as docile as a lamb.

"I'm a-comin'!" the bullwhacker bellowed. "I'm goin' ter have yer life this time! That's ther second time ye hev took me foul, an' I ain't goin' ter stand et, you bet! Look out fer yerself, now!"

He had drawn an ugly-looking knife, and he came with a rush.

There were first jeers at the giant's weak plea of another foul, and then cries of warning to the stranger.

Mr. Betts did not appear to be particularly alarmed.

He stood his ground firmly, looking not unlike a lion with his bushy and tangled hair and beard.

On came the Mauler, and as he came closer he lifted his knife to strike his foe to the ground. But once again he met with a mishap that balked his plan. Perhaps it was another foul.

The stranger made a movement that rivaled the lightning for quickness, and the man's knife was sent flying out of his hand and he grabbed his wrist and fairly bellowed with pain. But not much time was given him for that, for the stranger was not done with him.

Grabbing his shoulder, Mr. Betts wheeled him around and gave him a lifting kick.

Everybody was wild, and that was too much for Mr. Mauler to stand.

He whipped out a revolver as he turned, but before he could bring it to bear the stranger was upon him, and he was lifted up bodily and sent crashing against the rear end of the building.

There was a crash, and the Mauler went through, carrying half of the end of the shanty with him.

CHAPTER X.

STANDING THE CLOSE TEST.

THE crowd was now too amazed to cheer the performance.

"I warned him," cried Mr. Betts, "but he wouldn't leave me alone. I told him what would happen."

"Who in the name of wonders are you, anyhow?" asked King John.

"I'm Eli Betts, who never gets—left if he can help it," was the prompt response. "If you val'y ther life of that giant, you had better call him off now. If he tries his popper on me I'll most prob'ly fix him out."

"Go around and gather the Mauler up," ordered the chief, speaking to some of his men. "Disarm him, and tell him I say this thing must be dropped for the present."

The bullwhacker could be heard bellowing worse than a buffalo bull, and several men ran to carry out the chief's orders.

They found the fellow on his back, kicking wildly to get himself untangled out of the wreck, and he was swearing like the fabled trooper, or worse.

Half a dozen seized him at once, ostensibly for the purpose of helping him, but as soon as they had hold upon him they disarmed him. He was then lifted up and helped out.

If he had raved before he raved more then. "Give me my guns till I pepper him!" he cried. "Let me give him what he is wantin'. I didn't set out ter fight ther man an' ther mule together, anyhow. See what ther blame mule has done, will ye?"

This brought a howl of laughter.

"Why, ther mule didn't do that," he was

told; "that's whar ther stranger pitched ye through ther house."

"Git out!" cried the bullwhacker. "Thar ain't no man livin' could do that 'ar leetle trick. Ef he done et, let him try et again, that's all. Whar is he? I am goin' ter—"

"King John says you ain't ter do nothin' to him," he was interrupted.

"An' who's goin' ter stop me, I'd like ter know?"

"We ar', that's who!"

Some five or six of them held on to him like grim death, in spite of his struggles, and he had to submit.

In the mean time King John had been talking with the stranger.

"I'll see that Mose don't trouble you again, just now," he said. "You will have to look out for him pretty sharp afterward, though."

"An' I reckon I kin do that, boss. Ef he bankers fer any more ye might as well let him come an' git a full dose while he is about et. No more trouble ter do a whole job than half a one."

"No, I don't want him killed."

"Then cage him up, that's all. Ef he tries on any more of sech business wi' me, I'll sallyvate him in a way he won't git over. I'm Eli Betts, an' when I gets right up an' sweats, I never lets up till I've done ther proper caper by ther galoot whar roused me."

"Do you mean to say that is your real name?" the chief asked.

"My real name?" queried Mr. Betts, wonderingly. "It couldn't be any more real, I reckon. It's ther name my daddy wore, and my granddad afore him. It's a family name, is Eli; and Betts has been sung in song an' story fer ages. If thar's one thing more than another that the Bettses pride themselves upon, it's the family name! My own name? Well, I reckon I own it, some!"

"I had a notion that you might be in disguise."

At that the crowd became silent, and many a hand fell upon a weapon.

"Ha! ha! ha!" Mr. Betts laughed, full, round and naturally. "Me in disguise—me? Wull, I don't know how I'd go about et. Met a man the other day I hadn't seen in a dozen years, and then only seer him long enough ter ante when he called at ther pint of a gun; an' he sez, sez he: 'Hello, Betts! you look as nat'ral as life.'"

"That is all right, but that's your story. We want proof of it."

"Proof of et? How in ther world do ye expect me ter prove et to ye? Et can't be done, unless thar is somebody hyer whar knows me."

"Is all that hair and whiskers your own?"

"Wull, I reckon nobody else ain't got no claim onto et, pard. Mine! Wull, if persession fer a score or more o' years counts fer anything, I reckon I hev got some title to my own ha'r."

"I meant, is it false or natural?"

"False! A Betts with false hair! Pard, et's plain that you don't know ther Bettses. My granddad had most of his when he died, and my daddy had more'n I've got, an' I don't reckon I'll be bald this season. False? False ha'r on a Betts? Ha! ha! ha! Look hyer."

With that Mr. Betts took off his hat and yanked at his hair in a way that ought to have convinced anybody, and his beard the same.

"Nothing false about me, you bet!"

"Well, that's proof enough," said the chief, "but I had a suspicion. I have never heard of but one other man with strength anything like yours."

"Didn't take me for Samson, did ye?"

"No; but I did take you for Deadwood Dick, Junior."

Mr. Betts looked around in a sort of apprehensive way at that, and when he spoke it was in a lower tone.

"Ye don't mean ter say he is around hyar, do you?" he asked in alarm.

"No; but he might be. I have been expecting to see him, sooner or later, and wanted to make his acquaintance when he arrived. The way you handled Mauler Mose made me suspicious."

"I'm glad he hain't hyer," said Mr. Betts, in a relieved tone. "I ain't at all eager to fall in wi' him. He's too tarnal soon on ther shoot."

"Not after you, is he?" the chief asked.

"Wull, he has had me tough ter corral for some time, to own to the truth, an' as I'm innocent of ther charge I don't want ter git into no trouble. See?"

"We begin to see. What's the charge against you?"

"I don't mind tellin' ye, but ye onderstand that I'm innocent. That is ter be taken wi'out question."

"Certainly."

"Well, ye see, a hoss got missin' from a camp whar I'd been stoppin', an' it so happened that it went missin' on the same night that I made my depart. I didn't know nothin' about et. Next day I had a hoss fer sale at another camp, an' sold et, an' about that time down come a committee an' sez I'd stole ther brute. I was innocent, but ter save argymint I lit out, an' they haven't tried me yet."

"And where did you get the horse you sold?"

"Well, er—ye see, that was one my brother left to me when he died."

There was a roar of laughter at that.

"And Deadwood Dick had a hand in running you down, had he?"

"Wull, I heerd he was after me, an' I haven't been waitin' long in a place to see. Not that I'm 'feerd of him, bein' innocent; but et's inconvenient to attend these hyer petty trials, ye see."

The horde laughed wildly.

"Did you ever hear of King John?" the chief asked.

"Yes, I hev heerd of him," Mr. Betts answered, "but ye needn't ask me no questions 'bout him. I don't know nothin', an' ef I did I wouldn't tell. King John never done nothin' ter me."

"Well, I am King John."

"You? Git out!"

"Not at all, sir. It is as I tell you. How would you like to join my band of bully boys?"

"Say, kin ye prove what ye say, pard?"

"Of course I can prove it. Ask these men who I am. Am I not King John, my fine fellows?"

"That's who ye ar', you bet!"

"Wull, I ber blowed!" cried Mr. Betts.

He flung his hat down upon the floor with force.

"Ter think that I should fall in wi' you so unexpected like. Do ye know, I hev been wantin' ter strike your trail ever since Deadwood Dick sot out on mine? I'd like ter pitch my lot wi' yours."

"Do you mean that?"

"Course I mean et! I did steal ther hoss, boys."

There was another laugh at that, and just then the Mauler was led in.

"Let me at him!" he cried. "Turn out ther mule, but let me finish my work with ther galoot. I hadn't half begun."

"You'd better call it done," advised the chief. "This man has done you up, Mose, and you know it. He wants to be one of us, and you and he together will make a bully team."

The bullwhacker stared at the stranger.

"But, one of us has got ter be boss," he murmured.

"And I guess he has proved himself your master," laughed King John.

"Wasn't et the mule that sent me through ther end of ther shebang?" the Mauler asked.

Another laugh at that lame excuse.

"Of course it wasn't," said the chief. "It was the stranger. He is too big for you, even if he is the smaller. You had better own up beat."

There were good and sufficient reasons why Mauler Mose could not go against the will of his chief, so he pulled in his horns—so to say.

"Waal, ef he's to be one of us, of course thar's no use kickin' any more, I opine," he said. "We'll try a friendly bout some o' these days, though, ter see who is best man."

"Hyer's my hand, then," said Mr. Betts, extending. "I'm jest as easy ter cool off as I am ter rile up, an' a word or two like that puts me all right. Ef you ain't got nothin' 'g'in' me I ain't got nothin' 'g'in' you, and this makes et all right. Ther mule kin be led out, now."

The cause of all the trouble, the mule, was still as meek and gentle as it could be, and it was hard to believe that it had recently been so full of fire.

A man took hold of the bridle rather gingerly to lead it away, and the animal went with him tamely.

It was then that Mr. Betts repeated his offer to treat.

He did not have to call the second time, for every man present was ready at once, and the treat was accepted.

When it was over the stranger had to go through his clothes several times to scare out the amount to settle the score, but the demand was finally met in full and he was voted a chief.

Little they knew of the man they were harboring. The disguise was a good one, but any

slight accident might betray it, and then what chance would Deadwood Dick stand in such a den of vipers? He held his life in his hands here, truly.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DUDE PROPOSES A PLAN.

ALL this excitement, very naturally, had drawn attention away from the three prisoners, Haycross, Sutcliffe, and the young lady.

They had followed the crowd out of the hotel at the time when the stranger was letting himself be heard on the other side of the gorge, and little attention had been paid to them since.

Watching from a place where they could command a view of the bridge, they had witnessed the coming of the man on the mule, and had seen him conducted to the saloon.

"Who can the fellow be?" questioned the young woman.

"Some unfortunate like ourselves, no doubt," suggested the dude.

"Or else one of their own band playing a blind," amended the Westerner.

"Anyhow, he is taking the crowd," observed the young woman. "It would be a good chance for us to try to escape."

"But you'll not find me trying it on, after what he said," declared the Westerner. "No doubt some are on the watch. Anyhow, the bridge would balk us. No, there is no use trying it yet."

"Then what shall we do?"

"It's a good chance to scout around and see if we can't find out where the girl is a prisoner."

"You are right. We will do that."

"And, if possible, lay hold of a weapon or two."

"Shall we ever get out of here?" sighed the dude. "I only wish I had stayed with the stage."

"Or at home," added the young woman.

"Yes, or at home, you are right," the dude accepted.

"Well, as no one is giving us much attention," said Haycross, "let's do what I proposed. Let's see if we can find Roxy."

"Lead the way," sighed the young woman. "I'll keep my word with you, though I'd much rather find Junius Belland. But, I fear it is all over with him."

"Yes, I am afraid it is."

They walked down the street in company, and they were not molested, at first, every man they met being in haste to get to the Rooster Saloon.

Presently, though, they met four fellows who were about half drunk, and who stopped them at once.

Not only so, but they covered them with their weapons and ordered their hands up.

"Whar ye goin'?" demanded one.

"Your chief has given us the freedom of the camp," answered Haycross, sharply, "and we are going where we please."

"Ho! ho! Ye ar, hey? Waal, now, s'pose ye ante up what change ye happen to have fore ye go any furdur."

"If you rob us we'll report it to the chief," Haycross declared.

"What d'ye s'pose we care fer that? Ef ye say much, we'll drop ye an' chuck ye over ther ledge with ther rest of 'em. Nobody hyer would mourn fer ye."

"Well, you hold the best hand," Haycross admitted.

One of the four put away his weapon and searched their pockets, and when they went on their valuables had changed hands.

"They have got us in a tight fix, sure enough," said Haycross. "I take it that this has been by the orders of the chief, for now they have us in a worse fix than before. We can't buy anything."

"Never mind, we are alive yet," said the young woman, with remarkable coolness.

"But there's little telling how long we will be," sighed the dude.

"Now, about finding the girl," reminded Haycross. "Almost everybody is at the saloon, where they seem to be having a high time over something. Suppose we knock at every cabin till we find her."

"The only way, I guess," said the young woman.

"And with the chances of finding somebody else first," put in the dude.

"Yes, it's the only way I see just now," Haycross went on, "and we'd better be about it while we can."

Just then they had come to a cabin, and it was the one where Roxy Bonhame was imprisoned.

"And we may as well begin right here," said Francesca.

They stepped to the door and Haycross knocked lightly.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice asked.

"Are you Roxy?" Haycross inquired.

"Yes; is it Junius?"

"Well, hardly; but it's a friend just the same."

"Then who are you?"

"Penn Haycross."

"And was it you sent me the note?"

"No. What sort of note was it?"

"One from a friend. I think it was from Junius. Have you seen him?"

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Francesca. "That is proof that he is alive. He may be here in this camp even now."

"Who are you?" Roxy demanded.

"I am one who loved Junius Belland before you knew him," was the sharp retort.

"Then if you love him," said Roxy, "find him and guard him from danger."

"How about me?" spoke Haycross.

"I do not suppose I can ask you to help protect him."

"Hardly, unless you will accept now the offer I have made you before, and say you will marry me."

"I will never do that. You may as well leave me here. In fact, I do not see how you can do anything for me, anyhow."

"Every friend counts in a time like this."

"But, you are both my foes," spoke the girl within. "One would rob me of my promised husband, while the other would rob him of me. I do not want your help unless it be given unconditional."

"We are working together for your good," declared Haycross.

"And how so, pray?"

"Well, Miss Travis and myself have good reason to distrust and work against each other, but we agreed upon a compromise. She came here to scratch your eyes out, more or less, and I came here to settle a score with Belland. When we found out how it stood, she agreed not to harm you if I would not harm Belland, and so we settled it. I want you; she wants Junius."

"If that is the situation, do not help me further. You, Penn Haycross, certainly can not have your desire."

"But, this is foolish, Roxy, when your life is in danger."

"They can kill me but once."

"But they can kill you hard that one time, as the saying is."

"No matter."

"Is life of no value to you?" asked Francesca.

"Not with my father and Junius dead, or the one dead and the other lost to me," was the saddened reply.

"I intended asking to be shut up there with you, to bear you company," Francesca made known.

"You had better not."

"Why?"

"Because we are not friends, and cannot be friends."

"But I am willing to do you a friendly turn all the same, if you will let me."

"Yes; you have come to rob me of my lover, and you offer me life with nothing to live for. No; go your way and leave me to my fate."

"All right, that settles it."

"And do you say the same to me?" asked Haycross.

"I do."

"Remember, though, I will not allow Belland to have you if I am refused. I am either for him or against him."

"And you make us foes to each other, and both foes to your happiness," reminded Francesca.

"Better so. You bring me no hope or happiness, anyhow."

The trio drew away from the door to consult.

"What is going to be done about it?" asked Haycross.

"That's what gets away with me," responded the young woman.

"It certainly looks as if you can't be of much use to me in the game."

"And that being the case, you don't feel disposed to help me any. I guess our compact is broke."

"And as soon as we say that we are foes."

"We can't neighbor together any longer, I opine."

"Still, hadn't we better keep from open warfare? If you will still hold to your promise not to harm Roxy I'll stick to my bargain not to try to hurt Belland."

"We can do that, I suppose."

"Would you allow me to put in a word of advice to both of you?" here spoke up the dude.

They could barely see one another in the dim light, for the moon had not yet appeared.

"Yes, chip in," Haycross invited.

"Well, my word of advice is just this: You two are a pretty likely couple, and I think you would make a good match. Why don't you drop the other couple, where you don't seem to have much of a chance anyhow, and make a go of it yourselves?"

"Hardly," said Haycross.

"Never!" cried the young woman.

"That settles it, then," declared the dude. "It was an idea that came to me, and I thought it might work. Then you could all work together with the one object of getting away, and I could help you."

"I see," said Haycross. "One stroke for us and two for yourself. Pretty good, but it can't be done."

"Of course it can't be done," added the young woman decisively.

"I have nothing more to say, then. It looks as if it must be each one for himself."

It was then that the great crash at the saloon was heard, and their attention was drawn that way.

"Something is going on," spoke Haycross. "We might not miss anything by going there to learn what it is all about."

"Since we cannot do any good here," added the young woman, "Even were it possible to rescue this girl and find Junius, what could we do? We are about as helpless as we can be."

So, they went to the saloon, where they witnessed what took place after the bullwhacker was hurled through the rear of the shanty, as has been told.

CHAPTER XII.

DICK FINDS FAVOR.

DEADWOOD DICK had been keeping his eyes well about him, and had noted the coming in of the young woman.

He had asked himself at once the question—could this be Miss Bonhame? and at once decided against it. She did not tally with the impression Belland's remarks had given him of Roxy.

He had noted, too, Haycross and Sutcliffe, and that they were not of the outlaw band.

That the three were acquainted was plain, but he could not decide just what their acquaintance amounted to. It would hardly do, yet, to give any person a hint that he was not what he seemed.

After the treat was over and the score settled, Dick turned in the direction of the young woman, and, as though seeing her for the first time, exclaimed:

"Hillo! Bless me heart ef hyar ain't a purty leetle gal wi' red hair an' a cute leetle nose wi' a hint to et. Who is ther lady, mayor? Is et Mrs. King John? I allus bow to ladies."

He doffed his hat as he spoke and bowed profoundly.

The ruffians around him laughed, and the young lady fired up indignantly at his remarks.

Strange as it is, no matter how much red hair and a tilt nose are sung and praised, no woman possessing these charms likes to be reminded of it.

"No, sir, I am not Mrs. King John, nor Mrs. Anybody," Francesca snapped at him. "And I don't thank you for passing remarks upon my appearance, either."

"My!" ejaculated Dick. "Ain't she spunky, though! But, mayor, you'll allus find spunk with red hair an' a tipped nose."

He put his hand before his mouth, and meant that remark for an aside.

It was loud enough to be heard by everybody, though, and again the ruffianly horde laughed.

Dick had an object in view.

He wanted to learn all he could about these three.

"See here," spoke up Haycross, "if you can't speak less offensively about this lady, you had better keep your head shut."

Dick was led to believe this was the woman's husband or lover.

"Bless your honest soul, pard," he cried, "I wouldn't hurt her feelin's fer ther world! If I have said anything out of ther way I take et all back. I beg yer pardon, lady."

He bowed again.

The young woman snubbed him as he deserved.

"Won't you interdoose me, mayor?" Dick

then asked, appealing to King John. "I take et these hyer three don't rightly belong ter your family."

"You are right," the outlaw chief admitted. "They are strangers, like yourself, and only came here a little while ahead of you. We have given them the freedom of the camp, with the privilege of joining us if they want to."

"That's ther way of et, hey? Your wife, sir, I take et?"

This to Haycross.

"No, sir," was the short answer.

"Perhaps yours?" to the dude.

"I have not the honor," was the dude's response.

"I'm nobody's wife," snapped the fiery young lady, sharply. "I'm single, and my name is Francesca Travis; daughter of Tom Travis of Tombstone."

"That's straight as a string," said Dick. "If there's anything I like more 'n another in a woman it's straight talk. That lets us understand jest who an' what ye are, an' thar can't be no mistake. I like ter git acquainted wi' folks."

"I want to ask you, King John, where I am to lodge to-night," the young woman spoke, turning to the chief.

"Why, I told you to procure a room at the hotel," was the response.

"But, I have been robbed, and have no money to pay with."

"Robbed?"

"Yes."

"Yes; four of your men set upon us a few minutes ago and cleaned us out," explained Haycross.

"I'll see about that," King John declared. "But, no matter, you go to Duff at the hotel, lady, and tell him I said give you the best room there."

"That's ther way ter talk," cried Mr. Betts. "I allus like ter see ther right thing done by ladies, King John, and ef I'm lected ter be one of ye I'll stand up fer ther wimmin, every time."

"That's what we all do."

"Glad ter hear et. I take et this lady is ther only woman in ther camp."

"No, we have one other."

"Your wife?"

"Nobody's wife yet, but I intend to wed her to-morrow."

Dick noticed that Haycross gave a start, and that his hands clinched together convulsively.

"Ho! thar's goin' ter be a weddin', hey?" Dick cried. "That's ther stuff. I will be hyer to dance, you bet on that. Who is ther bride that's ter be?"

"She's the daughter of the former mayor, sir. Her name is Roxy Bonhame, I believe."

"Then you haven't knowed her long, I take et. No matter; quick courtship is ther best. Et don't give ye no time ter discover faults, an' repent of yer choice. I was married once myself."

"Yes?"

"You bet. Met ther gal one week and was married the next. Lived with her till the next week."

"Rather a short time."

"I'll tell ye how et was: I bought a load of wood and a sawbuck, and I sez, sez I: 'Mariar, thar's a little job fer ye to do 'tween times.'"

"And that was all?"

"That was all I said. She said somethin', an' that was the last I seen of her."

The pirate crew laughed at his nonsensical story.

"May I be allowed to put in a word here?" asked Penn Haycross.

He spoke to the chief.

"Certainly; two if you like."

"I want to say that I have made up my mind to join with you if you'll have me."

"Ha! you have been quick to come to terms."

"I didn't see any other way. You have disarmed me, your men have robbed me, and I'm in a tight place."

"Well, there wasn't much choice, that's a fact."

"I have figured that out. But, if I join you it has got to be on condition. And if that is granted, this young lady will cast her lot with mine."

"Well, what's the condition?"

"That you allow me to marry her and have her for my own."

"Ho! on right thar," here put in Mauler Mose. "I reckon I'm second in command hyer, and I come in fer second choice of ther two gals."

"You will take her over my dead body if you get her," cried Haycross.

"Et won't be any trouble ter do that 'ar."

"And you'll find me dead when you get me," declared the girl. "I have the power to kill myself in an instant in a way you know nothing about."

She was talking for effect.

"And you can bet she'd keep her word," said Haycross.

Deadwood Dick saw which side he was required to favor, and he chipped in promptly.

"In all sech matters, pards," he said, "I am in favor of ther best-lookin' man, an' in this hyer case et's sartainly this feller."

He indicated Haycross.

"It is that way or no way," Haycross flatly announced. "If you won't take us at our terms you can go ahead and do your worst. You can only kill me, and the lady can kill herself in spite of you."

"I'll fight et out wi' ye," proposed the Mauler.

"What's the use. You might win, for you are a bigger man than I, but that wouldn't help your case any, as the lady has told you."

"I'd take chances on that."

"Well, we won't do it that way. Besides, I am not proposing this thing to you, but to your chief. What do you say to it, King John?"

"It shall be as you propose," the chief declared.

Mauler Mose began to bellow at once, but King John drew a revolver upon him.

"Not a word out of you," he cried, "or down you go. I'm boss here yet, as you will find."

"That being the case," said Haycross, "I'm going with the lady to the hotel, and I'll sleep before her door to-night. I suppose there is no use my asking for my weapons back."

"Not to-night. You can do what you propose, but we'll settle the business in full to-morrow. Nobody will molest you or the lady to-night."

"All right."

"And what about me?" asked the dude.

"Et hizz me you ar' a tenderfoot, ain't ye?" spoke up Mr. Betts.

"That's what they call me, sir," was the response.

"Tender as can be," assured King John. "I don't know what to do with him. He is harmless, though, and will keep over."

"What's he from?" asked Dick.

"He was only a passenger. He's out seeing the sights, and he is seeing all he wants of them. Came up here by chance, as I understand it."

"And I should like the chance to get away again," Mr. Sutcliffe declared. "If I had known what a perfectly horrible place it is I assure you I would never have come."

"King John," cried Dick, "I want a favor."

"What is it?"

"I don't ask either one of the gals, but I would like ter have this hyer lad fer my lackey. What do ye say?"

"Do you mean that?"

"Why, cert! I'll make him take keer of Cunningham, my mule, and wait on me all day. Oh! I tell ye the Bettses ain't no slouches, an' a body servant will be jest ther cheese. An', fer your amusement, I'll make him larn ter ride ther mule."

"Well, take him," said the chief. "I don't care what you do with him. I guess he was a fit subject for the canyon ont there anyhow. Yes, take him and make him useful, if you can. But, mind you, one and all, you are only on parole for the night, and you will have to be careful how you conduct yourselves. To-morrow I'll see about taking you into the band."

CHAPTER XIII.

THAT NIGHT OF PERIL.

DEADWOOD DICK was satisfied in some respects; in others he was not.

He had passed the first ordeal, and had escaped detection. But, it was now night. Would he stand the test by daylight?

That was a question.

He had taken much care with his disguise, to have it as perfect as possible, but he knew he had shrewd foes to fight against.

Still, he was satisfied that he had stood well the first close test, and also that he had made so favorable an impression on the band.

He was satisfied, too, with what he had learned regarding Roxy Bonhame. He had reason to believe that she was still safe from harm, and that she had yet some hours of respite.

In other things he was not so well satisfied.

He had not learned where the girl was; he had no immediate prospect of being able to strike a blow in favor of her and her lover; in fact, he had some doubts about being able to accomplish much.

And it was no wonder he felt doubtful.

Here he was, in the midst of a den of vipers,

and once let his true character be known and he would stand little chance for his life.

But, we know Deadwood Dick, the Prince of the West. He was not easily discouraged, and did not go to meet trouble half way. He had a work to accomplish here, and everything depended upon his own efforts.

Penn Haycross and Francesca left the saloon in a few minutes, going to the hotel.

Sutcliffe, the dude, remained, of course.

He was eying his "master" with a good deal of apprehension, and when, after the young woman had gone out, Mr. Betts approached him, he drew back.

"Come," said Dick, "thar's no use your kickin' over ther traces, young feller. I have bargained for you an' you ar' my property. Step out hyer an' let's git a good look at ye."

Laying hold of the fellow's shoulder, he drew him out to the center of the room, where he proceeded to inspect him critically.

"A likely lookin' lad," he observed. "I think ye will do, young feller. I like yer looks. I think I kin break ye in so's ye will be of some use ter me. Sany, kin ye dance?"

"N—no, sir; on me word of honor, sir, I can't."

"Wál, let's see ye try. Now, ketch on and shuffle out a jig to this tune."

With that Mr. Betts began to whistle, at the same time clapping his hands on his knee, giving a lively dance air.

"Goodness!" the dude ejaculated. "I can't do it, don't ye know. I never danced in me life."

"Then et's time ye did," he was told.

"Yes, dance right up now," ordered Dick, "or I'll have ter make ye do et. I don't stand no foolin'."

"But, I can't, really I can't—"

"Somebody lend me a revolver fer jest one minute," requested Dick, "an' I'll see ef he won't 'bey his master."

"Why, are you not armed?" asked King John.

"Armed? What would I be armed fer? I'm fisted, wi' Samson an' Goliar," exhibiting his fists, "an' thar's all ther arms I need. Et won't do fer me ter use one o' them on this frail feller, though, fer if I did he'd never git up again."

"Well, here's a revolver."

King John handed him a weapon as he spoke.

"Now, sir, you dance," Dick ordered the dude.

"No matter how good or how bad ye do et, jest dance fer all you're worth."

He aimed the revolver at the fellow's head, and whistled again.

Mr. Sutcliffe danced, to the best of his ability, and that was of the worst order. Everybody laughed, and Mr. Betts was called a bully good fellow.

Not a man among them but was ready to welcome him into the band.

"That's right," he said when he allowed the dude to stop. "Allus obey on sight when I speak, an' et will save trouble. I'll make a handy man of you before I part with ye."

"But, you don't mean to keep me here?"

"Well, I reckon. I have cast my lot with this band, and you will have to check in your lot wi' mine, or get a worse fate."

During the next half-hour Dick made a good deal of fun for the crowd, with the dude as the object of it all, and finally he took leave and went to the hotel where he had something to eat.

He kept the dude right with him, and made him stand behind his chair while he ate.

There was a chance while he was at the table for Dick to speak to the young man.

"You are in a bad situation here," he remarked in a low tone.

Sutcliffe started.

The change in Dick's manner of speaking, his dropping of the dialect, proved that he was not what he seemed.

Dick had studied the fellow, and knew he could trust him.

"I certainly am," the dude responded, with the same caution.

"Well, I want to help you, but you will have to play a pretty hard role if you expect to get out of here alive. By telling you this I am putting my life into your hands. If you betray me it will be death for both of us."

"Trust me."

"That's what I'm doing. I wanted to ask a question of you."

"Well?"

"Do you know where that young woman is? The one called Roxy, I mean."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Third cabin down, on this side the street."
 "Good. I have got to get a word with her this night. Mind, not a hint that I am not what I seem. And, to play the thing out I shall have to use you pretty hard."

"I don't care. I'll stand anything, if there is a chance of getting out of here."

Dick asked several questions, and as a result he soon had in his possession all the dude knew about Haycross, the young woman of the red hair, and others.

The meal over, Dick returned to the bar-room, his servant carrying his hat for him.

"That is right, Samule," Mr. Betts said, as he received his hat. "You see, I have given him a new name, pards; Samule, ther servant o' Eli. That's right, Samule, an' now you kin git down an' wipe ther dust from my boots. Have you a han'kercher in yer pocket?"

"Yes, sir."
 "Then do et with that, so's not ter sp'il ther leather."

The crowd laughed loudly, particularly Mr. Duff the landlord, and the dude got down upon his knees and did as directed.

Eli Betts was growing in favor all the time. He made the dude dance again for the enjoyment of the crowd, then made him sing a song, and he himself made fun enough to satisfy any reasonable demands.

He had an object in it all. It was to keep the attention of the rascally horde drawn to something, and so have them occupied, thus to insure the more the safety of their prisoners.

Frequent trips were made to the saloon, where Eli was liberal with his money, always managing to rake together enough out of his ragged clothes to pay for the treats he ordered. But at last sleep was the order of things.

Midnight had come, the moon was high, and the tired denizens were beginning to drop away to woo the sweet restorer.

Finally Dick and his man bunked down upon the narrow apology for a piazza to the hotel, Mr. Betts making his dude surrender his person for a pillow, and in a little while they were snoring.

But, Deadwood Dick did not sleep. He was waiting for the moon to go down, when he had some work to do.

Simple as that work was, he must do it unseen. No suspicion must attach to him if he would carry his ends.

Finally the moon went down, and not a sound was to be heard in the camp.

Not a soul was astir, unless the guardsmen at the bridge, and it was very doubtful if even they were awake.

Dick's pillow, the unhappy dude, was asleep. But, Dick had whispered his plan to him, so he left him without any hesitation when the time for action came. If he awoke he would remain quiet and await his master's return.

When it was quite dark again, and it was the darkest hour, that before dawn, Dick stole softly from the piazza and made off in the direction of the cabin where Roxy Bonhame was imprisoned.

He had been keeping guard over the cabin all night, really.

Arriving there, he knocked very lightly upon the door, hardly hoping that he would be heard.

But, he was. There was a sound of steps within, and the next moment there came a whispered voice from just within the door.

"Who is there?" was asked.

"A friend," answered Dick.

"Is it you, Junius?"

"No."

"Is it Penn Haycross?"

"No."

"Then, who?"

"Listen: I am a friend of Junius Belland. I have come here to protect you till he can bring help. I have a plan to suggest to you, and one which you must carry out to the very letter."

"You have only to name it, sir."

"You must pretend that you are crazy."

"Crazy?"

"Yes. You have had great trouble; you are in great danger; you must pretend that it has turned your mind. When they come to you at daylight you must laugh and sing, and go on as only a crazy person can. It may be your only hope."

"What have I to hope in that?"

"They will be less likely to molest you, and you will have more freedom, no doubt."

"I will do it."

"That is right. You will not know me, but I will be watching over you. Do nothing rash. When I want to make myself known to you I

will speak the word *diamond*. No one will be likely to speak the same word to you. That is all. I go."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EARLY MORNING ATTACK.

At a very early hour the camp was awakened by something very out of the usual, for such a camp as it was then.

A woman was heard singing, loudly, almost wildly. And the singing came from the direction of the cabin in which the wild Rose of Rope Walk was imprisoned.

Eli Betts roused up on the hotel piazza just as King John came out the door, and the chief laughed as he noted the unique way in which Mr. Betts had been making use of his servant.

"That's a new sort of pillow, Mr. Betts," he said.

"Samule is goin' ter make a good servant," was the response. "But, chief, I am wonderin' what all that singin' is about."

"That is what I want to know myself. It must be my affianced bride, for the voice is in that direction. Come on, if you want to, and we'll soon see."

"I'm with ye," said Dick. "Samule, you stay hyer till your master gits back. Ef you would be a good servant ye must be 'edient."

The dude sat down on the step to wait.

King John led the way into the cabin where Roxy was, and unlocked the door.

The girl was standing in the middle of the floor, waving her arms and singing as loudly as she could raise her voice.

Her hair was down, and there was a wild look in her handsome eyes.

"Thunder!" ejaculated the outlaw. "She's gone mad!"

The girl looked at the intruders, and stopping her singing, broke into a merry peal of laughter.

"Mad ez she kin be!" cried Mr. Betts, drawing back. "Anything but a crazy gal!"

"What's to be done with her?"

"Diamond! how should I know?" cried the ragged Betts.

He noticed that the girl gave him a sweeping glance as he spoke that word.

"I should say not ter harm a hair of her head, though," he added. "Ef's the worst kind o' luck ter harm crazy folks. Better use her mighty gentle like."

"This is too bad," the chief of the ruffian band mused. "Now I'm dished of making my bride as I intended. Nobody would want to marry a crazy woman, I guess."

"Rather not, I opine. I should say ter—But, then, et ain't fer me ter offer advice ter you—"

"No matter, out with it."

"I was goin' to say, turn her loose and let her roam around. Ef's possible thet she may come all right."

The girl was now singing again, and the two men turned away and retraced their steps to the hotel, leaving the door open.

There King John said to his men:

"That girl has gone clean mad. We'll let her have the liberty of the camp. Don't a man of you speak to her, only see that she don't come to harm. Pass the word around."

About that time the girl came out of the cabin, and she came singing and dancing up the street.

It would have been laughable had it not been so very pitiable.

That the men did not laugh, though, was more owing to their fear of their chief, for their hearts were incapable of anything like pity.

Penn Haycross came out of the hotel just then, accompanied by Francesca, and at sight of the Wild Rose, he cried:

"You wolves! See what your work here has done!"

He pointed at the girl, and at once started out to meet her, evidently to befriend her.

"Hold on, there!" ordered King John, sharply.

Haycross turned his head to find himself covered with a revolver.

"Come right back here, or I'll drop you," the chief ordered. "Don't you go near that girl."

With a snarl Haycross turned back.

"That remark of yours shows us what is in your mind," the chief said. "I guess you won't make a good member of our band."

"I should say not!" echoed Deadwood Dick.

For his own sake he had to side in with the chief in his opinion.

"And I'm going to lock you up for safe-keeping," King John added. "Your declaration of last night was only a sham."

"Shows for itself," agreed Dick.

"Men, take him and lock him up in the cabin there, and see to it that he don't get away."

Haycross was seized, and in spite of his struggles was taken away and confined in the cabin the chief had pointed out.

"Do ye see that 'ar, Samule?" Dick asked, turning to his dude. "Thet will be your fate, sure, ef ye don't carry yerself straight an' keep yer nose clean."

"I see," the dude answered.

"And you take warning by it yourself, sir," said the chief. "I have no reason to doubt you yet, but if reason appears I'll serve you the same, or worse."

"I won't squeal," was the calm response. "All I ask is a fair chance ter show ye my true colors. I won't ask ter be let into ther band till ye ar' sure of me, and ef ye have any doubts about me, fire me out."

"We'll probably do better than that."

"What?"

"Hang you."

"Hal! hal! hal! Wal, that might save ther sheriff a job one o' these days; I dunno."

Meanwhile the Wild Rose had gone on up the street till she came to the cabin where she had lived with her father, and there she entered, still singing.

The men who had slept there were up and out now.

King John had been watching her, and proposed going down that way to see what she would do.

Dick went with him, and they found the girl lighting a fire, preparatory to getting breakfast. It was a sight that ought to have moved the outlaw's heart to pity, for it appeared that she was thinking of her dead father.

Even Dick wondered if she was not mad, indeed, instead of only pretending.

"Let her go ahead," said King John, unfeelingly. "I'll bet she can cook a better meal than any man I've got, and when she's done I'll take breakfast with her."

Dick laughed, and pretended to take it as a huge joke.

He felt more like taking the villain by the throat then and there, but he knew too well that would only bring disaster upon them all.

King John asked Dick to stay, too, so they sat down.

The girl moved around at her work, singing as she went, and sometimes laughing wildly, and at last a tempting repast was ready.

The outlaw chief and the Prince of Detectives sat down, and while they ate they talked. Several times the girl addressed King John as her father, urging more of the food upon him.

They were about done when a great shouting was heard without, accompanied by a discharge of weapons.

"An attack!" cried the chief, springing up and rushing out.

Deadwood Dick was not surprised, except that help had come sooner than he had looked for it.

Turning to the girl, he uttered the word "diamond" again, and receiving a nod of recognition from her, followed King John.

As soon as they were out of the cabin they had a view of the drawbridge.

There on the other side of the gorge, in the morning sunlight, was a company of mounted men, extending back into the defile as far as could be seen.

"Trapped!" cried the outlaw chief. "I didn't look for them so soon. I had my plans laid to give them the slip myself, but here they are. Eli Betts, here is the chance for you to prove what you are worth."

"And Eli Betts he will!" cried Dick.

The men from the bridge were running in, and the whole camp was wild with excitement.

"Samule!" called Dick, as they ran to the hotel.

"Yes, sir," and the dude ran to join him.

"Keep right near me, now, if you vally your life."

"Yes, sir."

"If you don't I'll kill you, and if you do your worthless kerkiss may save me from bein' killed. See?"

"Y—yes, sir."

But in the next breath Dick whispered to him.

"I want you near meso I can direct you what to do. Upon you may depend a life!"

To the dude's credit be it said that he was not a coward at heart, when it came to the pinch, and he knew his life depended upon his obedience.

A man on the other side of the gorge was now waving a flag of truce and shouting.

King John went out to hear what he had to say.

"We call upon you to surrender," he was informed. "If you do not do so, we are prepared to blow you up."

"You can blow and be blamed!" the outlaw shouted back defiantly. "If you do you will kill a good many prisoners in these cabins, men and women together."

"If you will surrender the prisoners to us unharmed," a condition was offered, "we will give you a chance."

"Never! Go ahead and do your worst."

With that the outlaw walked back defiantly to the shelter of the cabins, and there called his men together for a consultation.

At the head of the attacking party rode Junius Belland, baggard and well-nigh exhausted, and a groan of disappointment had escaped him when he reached the bridge and found it raised.

He and his followers had swept through the defile, intending to cross the bridge on the run and take the camp by surprise.

Here they were, helpless.

The camp could hold out against them forever, if they could procure food and ammunition. That would be the only question with them.

The only hope, besides, was that Deadwood Dick was there, and that he had not been detected. If there, and free, some help could certainly be looked for from him.

A signal had been arranged between Balland and Dick, by which Dick was to be known. He was to appear without a coat, with his right arm bare to the shoulder. It had been thoroughly understood, and a man of such appearance was not to be shot if it came to a fight.

Belland and his men looked in vain for such a person. He was not to be seen, and the young man's heart almost failed him.

CHAPTER XV.

DICK'S DOUBTFUL DODGE.

KING JOHN, as said, had called his men together for a council.

He called for his man Duff, that worthy being his second in command, and as soon as he appeared the chief demanded:

"Duff, what is going to be done here?"

"Fight 'em!" was the prompt response. "We have got ther best hand, by ther long odds."

"That's what's ther matter!" cried Mr. Betts. "We'll fight 'em, tooth an' nail, you bet! Hyer's what's with ye, every time!"

He flung off his ragged coat as he shouted.

His right arm, displaying several scars, was found to be naked to the shoulder.

Around his waist was a belt, but no weapons were in it. He was, it seemed unarmed, save for the weapons Nature had given him. His arm well bespoke the wonderful strength he had displayed.

"Yas, I'm with ye!" he yelled, brandishing his fists. "Hyer's old Samson," flourishing his right fist. "an' hyer's old Goliath," displaying his left. "Only let me git into ther crowd an' git inter motion, an' see ef thar ain't a clean swath mowed out afore ye can say boo!"

"But, you couldn't do anything without weapons," reminded the chief.

"Weapons or not, I'm with ye!" was the rejoinder. "I don't ask ye to trust me armed ef ye don't want ter."

"We'll arm you. Find him a brace of good revolvers, men. And now, what is your opinion about them, Betts? What had we better do? Let's see what sort of general you'd make."

"Why, bless yer dear soul," cried Eli, "I don't want ter be offerin' advice, even ef ye do ask et. And, as fer bein' a general, I don't lay claim ter nothin' of ther kind."

"But, I demand to hear what you'd suggest."

"Wal, ef ye put et that way I can't 'bjeet, I opine. Thar's one of two ways ter tackle ther job."

"And how are they?"

"Wal, we ar' hyer an' they ar' out thar; we kin stay hyer an' let 'em do ther wu'st they kin. Otherwise, we kin get our force together, charge right out thar an' tackle 'em an' run 'em off. But, that would mean loss to your band."

"Anybody could see those plans. Can't you invent something in the way of strategy?"

Mr. Betts scratched his head.

"I don't know 'bout that 'ar," he said. "Et never run much in ther family, I reckon."

"Well, try it."

Just then came a volley of shots from across the chasm.

"Hear that 'ar!" cried Betts. "Wait till I tell 'em what I think of 'em, an' then I'll try ter git holt o' some idee."

He rushed out from shelter, brandishing his bare arm and shouting:

"What d'ye mean by et, ye low-lived cowards, ye? What good will et do ye? Ye kin stay thar an' shoot all day, an' ye couldn't never hit a man. Wait till we open fire on ye, an' then see."

There came another volley at that, and Eli dodged back to cover with haste.

"You're a fool!" cried King John. "They might have plugged you, if they had tried hard. That was a foolish trick."

"Couldn't help it, and a miss is as good as a mile, anyhow."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"Of course ye want me ter speak right out plump, don't ye?"

"To be sure."

"Wal, then, we have got ther best hand now. We kin hold out as long as we kin scare up a bit to eat. We're good fer a couple o' months, countin' on ther hosses fer grub when et comes to et."

"Exactly."

"On t'other hand, them fellers has got ther hull world outside of 'em, an' kin hold ther fort forever. In the long run we ar' in ther wu'st box."

"Yes, curse the luck!"

"That bein' ther case, I'd say make 'em give ye ther best terms ye kin an' so git out afore they git a bigger force 'gainst ye."

"But, how force the terms?"

"Threaten ter kill ther gals ef they don't do what ye demand."

"Betts, put it ther!" cried the chief. "I see you are with us in good earnest. Come in here till we talk this thing in private."

They shook hands, and entered the cabin which they were standing near.

"I hadn't any idee they could get a force here so quick," the chief declared. "My plan was to get what wealth was to be found here, and then light out and leave my men to stand the storm. See?"

"I see."

"The crowd has got to be a little bigger than I can handle, and I was going to shake them. Now, you have got a level head, and if you and I can get off we may as well do it. If they bring a cannon here we are gone up, sure. That is, unless we put the prisoners to the front."

"I'll tell ye," Dick suggested. "I don't think ye had better cut loose from yer men till ye git well out of ther woods. Ye might need 'em. And fer ther love ov mercy don't let 'em find out ther trick ye meant ter serve 'em."

"All right. But, something has got to be done. If you can't suggest anything, I'll try it myself."

"Wal, hyer's a modest idee, ef ye think et would work."

"What is it?"

"Let's git all ther prisoners together, an' march 'em out to ther front, an' thar declare that we'll burn 'em alive ef they don't git out of ther defile an' leave ther way open fer us."

"But, they'll demand some terms in return."

"They'll demand the prisoners, of course. We'll promise to leave 'em here, so they can come an' get 'em."

"It won't do."

"Why?"

"They would follow us up and attack us."

"Mebby they would, but I bet we have got ther most men. It's my idee ter deal with 'em 'fore they get any more."

"You are right. Well, let's go and get the crazy girl and make use of her. I have reason to believe her lover is at the head of that company."

"That so? That's bully! He won't see her hurt, an' we'll make him come to our own terms. You are a chief, King John, an' et will do me proud ter serve ye. I'm with ye."

That determined upon, they went outside again.

There King John ordered his men to assemble, ready for fight, behind the shelter of the cabins and shanties, and he and Betts went to the cabin where the crazy girl had been left.

The dude went with them, sticking close to Dick, as he had been ordered to do.

Needless to say they went the rear way, keeping well under cover.

The Wild Rose was still heard singing and laughing by turns as they drew near, and Dick wondered whether she had really gone mad.

The other young woman had dropped out of sight, suddenly, and Dick had not seen her for some minutes. He asked the chief if he had seen her, and he had not. It was supposed she had taken shelter somewhere.

"Hillo, Diamond, still warblin', are ye?" cried Dick, as he and the chief entered the cabin.

"Have you seen my papa?" the girl asked.

"I guess your par is all right, miss," was the response.

The girl laughed wildly, and the next moment resumed her singing. If not crazy in fact, she was playing the role well.

Now had come the time for the Detective Prince to show his hand. He had decided upon a desperate dodge, and nothing but the coolest nerve could carry it out. His own life and the lives of the prisoners depended on him.

So far he had been playing his cards with skill—doubly so, for he had led the outlaw chief to believe he himself was ruling his own movements. His one desire had been to bring him to a situation like this, though the attack had been made earlier than he had figured on.

"Well, let's take the girl and go out with her, and see what they have to say," King John proposed.

"All right!" assented Mr. Betts, and he stepped forward as if to lay a hand on her. Instead of that, though, his arm shot out and a revolver was under King John's nose.

"Make one sound," he cried, "and you are a dead man!"

With an oath the chief sprang aside and drew his own weapon; but his wonderful quickness did not serve him. Deadwood Dick's left fist was quicker still, and when it shot out King John dropped senseless to the floor. A desperate undertaking was begun!

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the Wild Rose.

"Then you are not mad?" asked Dick.

"Of course not!"

"You played it so well that I almost feared you were. Now, much of the success of my plan must depend on you and Mr. Sutcliffe, here, and we must make haste."

"Only tell us what to do."

"Well, you retire to the other apartment there, while Mr. Sutcliffe makes an exchange of clothes with this knave. Then, when I have touched up his disguise a little we'll be ready."

The girl obeyed quickly.

"And now we'll make haste, urged Dick to the dude. "I guess you can put on this fellow's clothes right over your own, for he is a trifle larger than you. Try it, anyhow. Then I'll bind him and cover him with a blanket. Make all the haste you can."

The outlaw was speedily disrobed, and as speedily bound and gagged, and thus rendered helpless, a blanket was thrown over him.

By the time that was done the dude had clad himself in his attire, and with help from Dick, was soon so disguised that he could "pass muster," at a distance, as the brigand chief.

Dick then spoke of his plan to his two assistants, and together they left the cabin and advanced out into the open, when the supposed King John waved a flag of truce, and the firing ceased.

They were of course in sight of the entire band, but the trick was not suspected. They had seen them enter the cabin together, and together they came out. If they remarked the absence of the dude they perhaps supposed he had been left behind, while the parley was being held.

CHAPTER XVI.

RETRIBUTION IN PART.

HALF-WAY from the cabins to the bridge they proceeded, each with a hand on an arm of the girl, who was still pretending crazy, singing as she went, and there they stopped.

The supposed King John carried the flag of truce, while the bared arm of the pretending Mr. Betts was the next most conspicuous object.

From what they had heard of the conversation between Betts and King John, the outlaws understood something of what was about to be done, and seeing that the truce was observed, they came out from shelter to hear what was said.

Deadwood Dick, imitating the voice of King John to the best of his ability, addressed the men across the chasm.

From where the outlaws were they could not tell but that it was the outlaw chief speaking.

"Hello, there!" was called.

"What is the word?" came the response.

"We are willing to compromise this thing," was shouted back.

"How?"

"If you will retire and allow us to leave here, we will surrender the prisoners to you."

"And if not, what then?"

"This girl shall be burned at the stake before your very eyes," was the grim response.

At that the outlaws set up a shout of approval.

Deadwood Dick gave a signal to Junius Belland, and the offer was accepted.

"Very well; we'll do that!" came back the answer. "Deliver all the prisoners to us, and you shall go out."

Dick had not forgotten Haycross and the young woman whom he had befriended. He would not leave the camp without them.

"All right!" he answered back. "We have three or four prisoners, and we'll send them over to you. You must retire into the defile while we lower the bridge. We take no chances."

"We'll do that."

Dick's signals gave the cue to the response.

Speaking then to the dude, Dick left him there with the Wild Rose while he walked boldly back to the crowd.

"What's ter be done?" asked Duff.

"The chief says let me have the prisoners, that 'ar man and ther young woman, and for all of ye to stand ready ter charge ef ther enemy attempts to come over ther bridge."

At that moment a shout was heard, and looking, Dick and the others saw Penn Haycross and Francesca Travis running in the direction of the bridge.

The young woman had been taking advantage of the excitement to release Haycross from his unpleasant dilemma.

"They hev got out, by tarnation!" cried Mauler Mose.

"Wal, let 'em go," said Dick. "They ar only goin' in ther right direction, anyhow."

Here was what might have proved a bad mishap for Dick, had it not been for the prompt action of the Wild Rose.

Seeing them coming, she said quickly to Sutcliffe:

"See! those two have escaped! If you do not stop them it will prove to the rascals that you are not King John. Draw your revolver and order them to stop where they are."

Dick had given his man a weapon at the cabin.

The dude well understood the peril and did as directed.

"Stop!" he cried. "Hands up, or you drop!"

Taking him to be King John, Haycross and his companion stopped at once, with their hands up.

Their hearts had sunk in despair; but, the next moment, their spirits rose again, when the Wild Rose said:

"We are friends, and are planning to escape. Do not let those devils suspect otherwise. Keep your hands up and stand where you are."

Haycross now saw the deception, and recognized Sutcliffe.

"The captain has brought 'em to time, you bet," cried Duff, when he saw the runaways stopped. "They can't fool ther captain very much. You won't have no trouble takin' 'em out thar, Betts."

"No, et seems not. Wal, I'll go back an' see what next is on ther program, an' I'll let ye know. Stand ready ter charge ef yer chief calls on ye, an' ef ye do, jest give 'em p'tic'lar fits. But, I guess thar won't be 'casion, for your captain has got ther best hand."

So leaving them, Dick strode back to the place where the others were waiting his coming.

They turned and faced the defile across the gorge.

"Hillo, over thar!" called out Dick.

"Hillo!"

"Here are the prisoners. You retire out of range, now, and we'll set them across, and then you have got to draw away and let us go in peace."

"That is understood."

"Very well; go!"

The men on the other side of the rift drew back into the defile, and were soon lost to sight, and Dick and those with him advanced toward the bridge.

The guardsmen there had deserted their posts, of course, so there was no one to interfere with their lowering the bridge. But, it must be the work of haste, now, for discovery meant death.

They had advanced part way to the bridge, from where they had been standing, when a voice from the rear hailed them.

It was the voice of Duff, King John's second.

They stopped and looked back.

"Well, what is it, Duff?" Dick called out, making it appear that it was the dude who spoke.

"Are ye crazy, King John?"

"I guess not."

"Ye must be."

"Why?"

"Ter let them 'ar prisoners go. Don't ye know et's ther only holt we have got on 'em? They'll blow us up wi' dynamite soon's they git them."

"Oh! I guess not, Duff; we will have something to say about that, you know. They caught us bad, worse than I thought they would, and this is the best chance for us to get out, before they bring more men."

They started for the bridge again.

Those in the rear were seen to consult for a moment, and some of them ran out toward the bridge, evidently to dissuade their chief from his purpose.

"Dick and his companions reached the bridge and began lowering it with all haste."

"Hold on thar!" ordered Mauler Mose.

"We have got somethin' ter say about this hyer!" added Duff.

"Turn upon them and present your revolver," Dick ordered the dude.

He obeyed, and Dick shouted:

"Stop! The first man to take another step, drops! I'll have you know that King John is still captain here!"

The bridge was now nearly down.

"Blazes!" shouted Mauler Mose. "Et ain't King John er tall! At 'em, pard, an' stop 'em!"

The bridge touched, and the chasm was spanned!

"Over with you," cried Dick. "Run ahead, and tell the company to charge as soon as you are safe."

"But, you—"

"Never mind me."

Dick had turned, revolvers in hand, and at once opened fire upon the pursuers.

Down went the Mauler, down went Duff, and yet another fell before the others took the hint and turned back.

Three out of five of them had dropped.

But now the main body set up a howl, seeing what had taken place, and they charged with a whoop.

Dick looked around.

The prisoners were safe across the bridge, and were disappearing into the defile.

The Prince of the West had noted well the construction of the bridge, and saw that by cutting one main stay it would be impossible to raise it again.

Casting about him swiftly, he espied an ax, and sprung and took it up.

The hungry horde was coming, firing as they came, but Dick heeded not their bullets yet.

Leaping back again, where the timbers of the framework of the draw partly protected him, he applied the ax, and a few strokes of its keen blade severed the stay and the bridge was a fixture.

Bounding over the bridge, then, Dick stopped long enough to empty his revolvers at the coming foe, when he turned and ran along the defile.

On came the outlaws, those mounted in the lead, and in a minute more, or less, their hoofs thundered on the bridge.

But, they never crossed.

The sudden shock caused the bridge to move, it gave a lurch, and then, with a crash, it went down into the chasm, carrying a third of the horde with it.

Many besides those on the bridge were carried down, being unable to stop the pressure from behind, and before the last victim of the calamity was claimed nearly a full half of the outlaw band had met their doom!

The remainder set up a howl of despair.

There they were, like rats in a trap, all escape cut off, and now without a leader.

Deadwood Dick stopped running when he heard the crash at the bridge.

"A just retribution has come upon them," he said to himself. "Never before was I in such a den of vipers. My life was not worth a pinch of snuff, but my doubtful dodge has been a success."

He waited, and in due time heard the horse-men returning, and when they came up he stopped them and told them of what had happened.

The outlaws were imprisoned, and the avengers were shut off from further attack for the present.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PLACE OF THE PAST.

THE rescuers, guided now by Deadwood Dick, went on to the edge of the rift, where they poured a volley into the outlaws, causing them to withdraw in haste to the shelter of the buildings.

"What's to be done now?" asked the leader of the rescue band.

"Let them stay there for the present," answered Dick. "There is no escape for them, for they can never span this break without help from this side."

"Unless they have a Junius Belland among them to walk a rope," said one.

"Even so, there is no chance for them to catch a rope to this side. No, we will withdraw, and leave them while a report is sent to the authorities."

So, turning, they went back, and soon came to the place where the recent prisoners were awaiting them.

Junius Belland was there, with the Wild Rose clasped in his arms.

A little way off stood Penn Haycross, talking earnestly with Francesca Travis, and as the crowd came up they turned hand in hand.

"Mr. Belland," spoke Haycross, "I have something to say to you."

"Very well, sir, say it," was the response.

"I came to Rope Walk for the purpose of fighting you for the hand of Roxy Bonhame, and this young lady came at the same time for the purpose of disputing with her the right to your favor."

"Yes?"

"Yes. But, now we have changed our minds. I have found in Miss Travis the ideal of a brave little wife, and it seems something about me has struck her favorably, so we have made a hitch of it. You are welcome to Roxy."

"This is a pleasant surprise, certainly," responded Belland. "I wish you all happiness."

"The same to you, Junius," spoke up Francesca. "I thought you filled my eye, but I have found one who fills it better. Roxy, you are welcome to him. I am satisfied."

"It is better so," said the sorrowing Wild Rose, simply.

"And I," cried Darby Sutcliffe, the disguised dude, "I am proud of my work. It was I who first suggested this thing, and I see my suggestion has been adopted. Seems Providence led me this way. I have had honor enough for one trip, and I'll be glad now to take the home trail."

"Had enough of the West?" he was asked.

"All I want. I never thought, when I set out, that I should play the role of a great outlaw, or that I should make myself useful to the renowned Deadwood Dick, of whom I had heard a great deal."

He removed his superfluous clothing, then, and appeared in his own proper attire.

After a rest the party took the back trail, leaving a few of their number to see that the outlaws did not by any chance get away, and in due time reached the larger town.

There a sheriff's posse was properly organized, and with Deadwood Dick at the head a second visit was paid the outlaw den.

This time King John was found in command. He had been discovered and released.

He came out with a flag of truce, and Deadwood Dick hailed him.

"Will you surrender?" asked Dick.

"Who are you?" was the demand.

"I am called Deadwood Dick, Junior."

"Are you the man who tricked me here?"

"If you mean Eli Betts, I must own the corn."

"Then I want to fight you, and the best man to win. If I win, I am to go free; if you win, then you take us all."

"There is no reason why I should stake my life against yours that way," said Dick, "and I refuse to do it. You must surrender unconditionally, or—"

"Then, take this!"

At that the rascal drew a revolver and fired, but the shot missed. The next instant he fell, his body riddled by more than a score of rifle bullets.

The remainder of the band surrendered, laying down their arms and coming to the front at once, and in due time means were established by which they were taken across the rift.

They were a bad lot, and were duly dealt with.

An attempt was made to recover the bodies from the gorge, but it was found infeasible, so they were left there in one common grave; and Rope Walk Camp was never reoccupied, for the next spring found a large section of the overhanging cliff gone. It had toppled over, almost crushing out of sight all the buildings below, and so littering the plateau as to render it wholly untenable; so it was never reclaimed, and to this day is known as King John's Death-trap, that everybody seems only too willing to avoid.

THE END.

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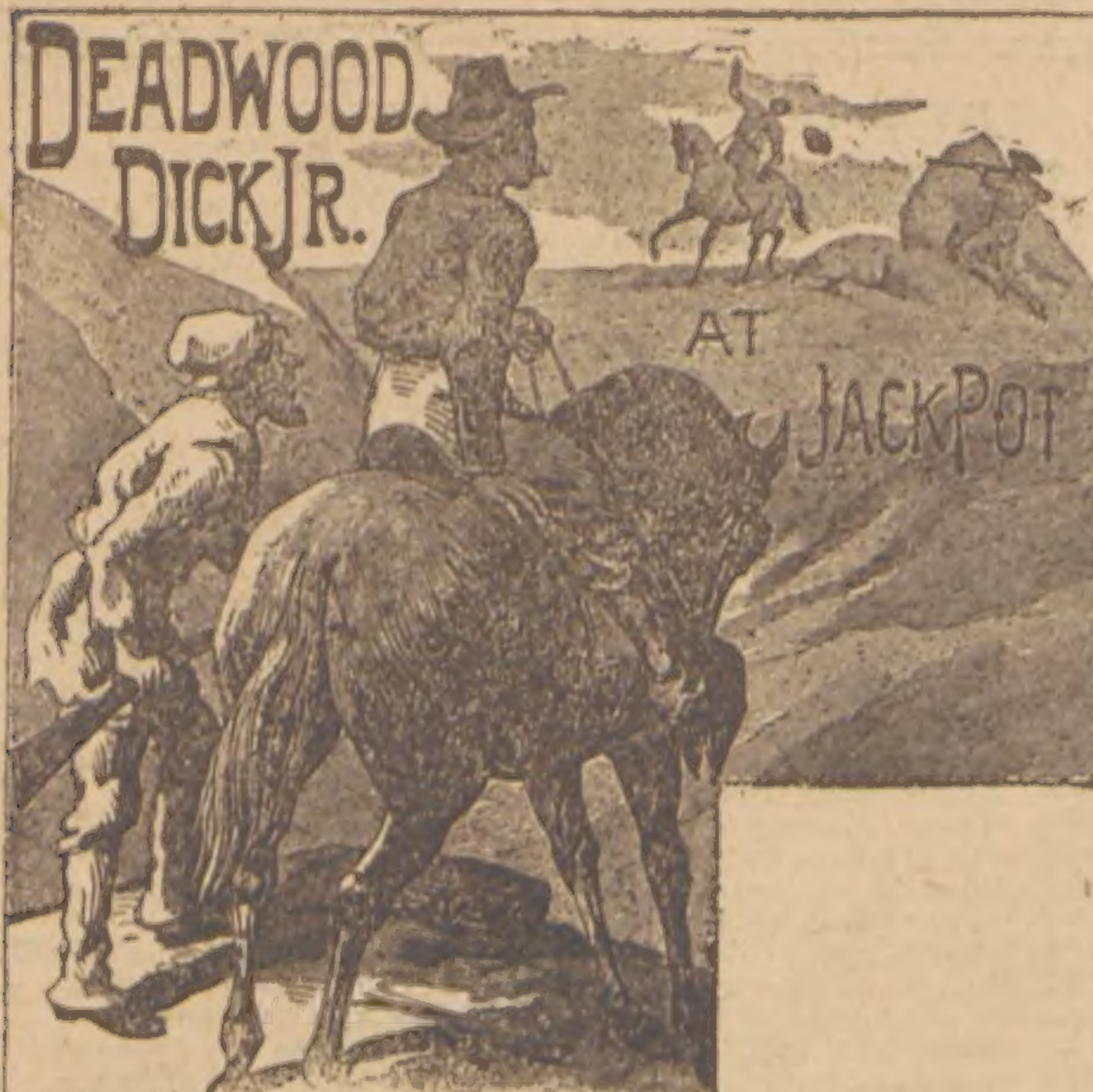
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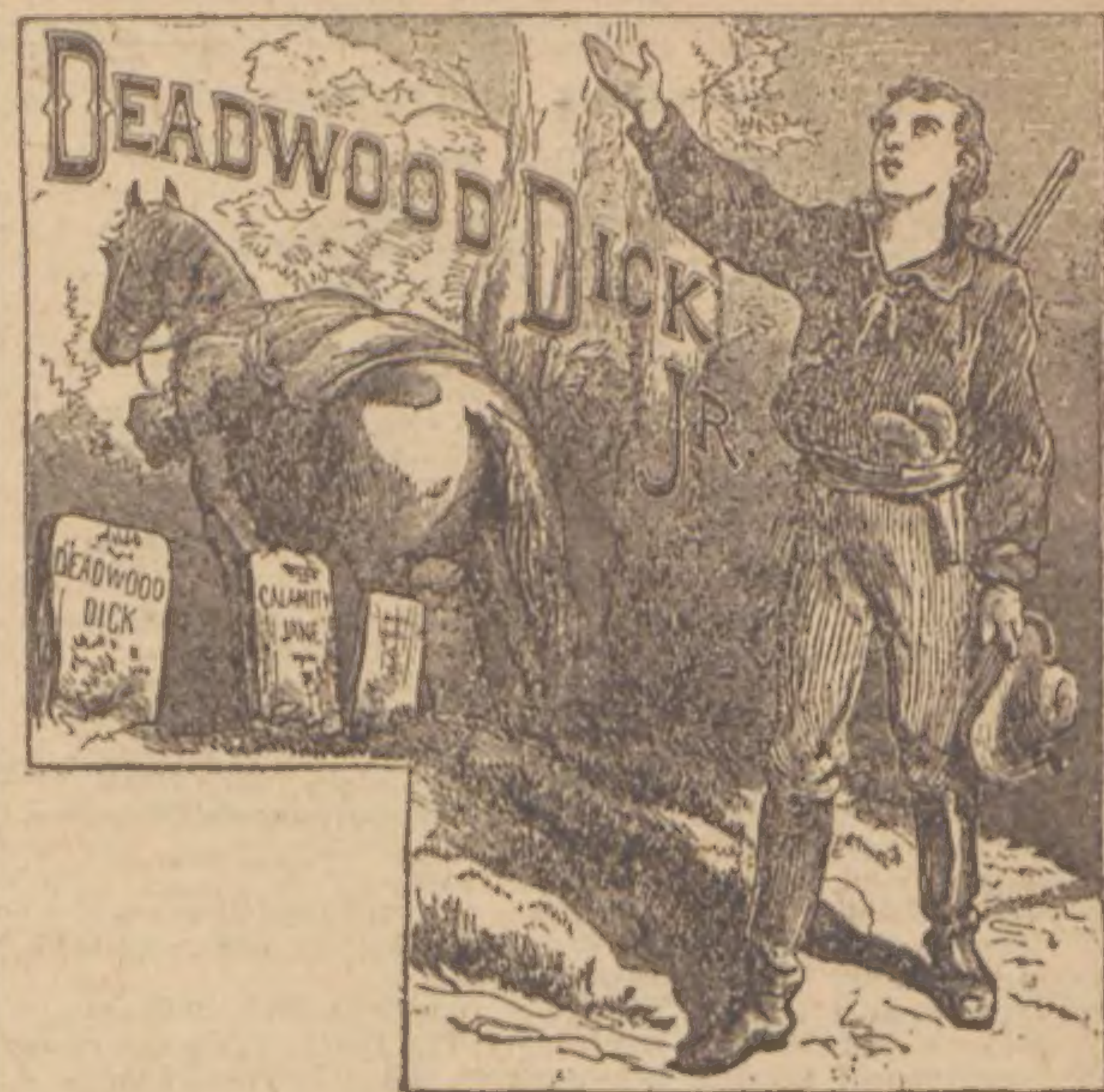
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